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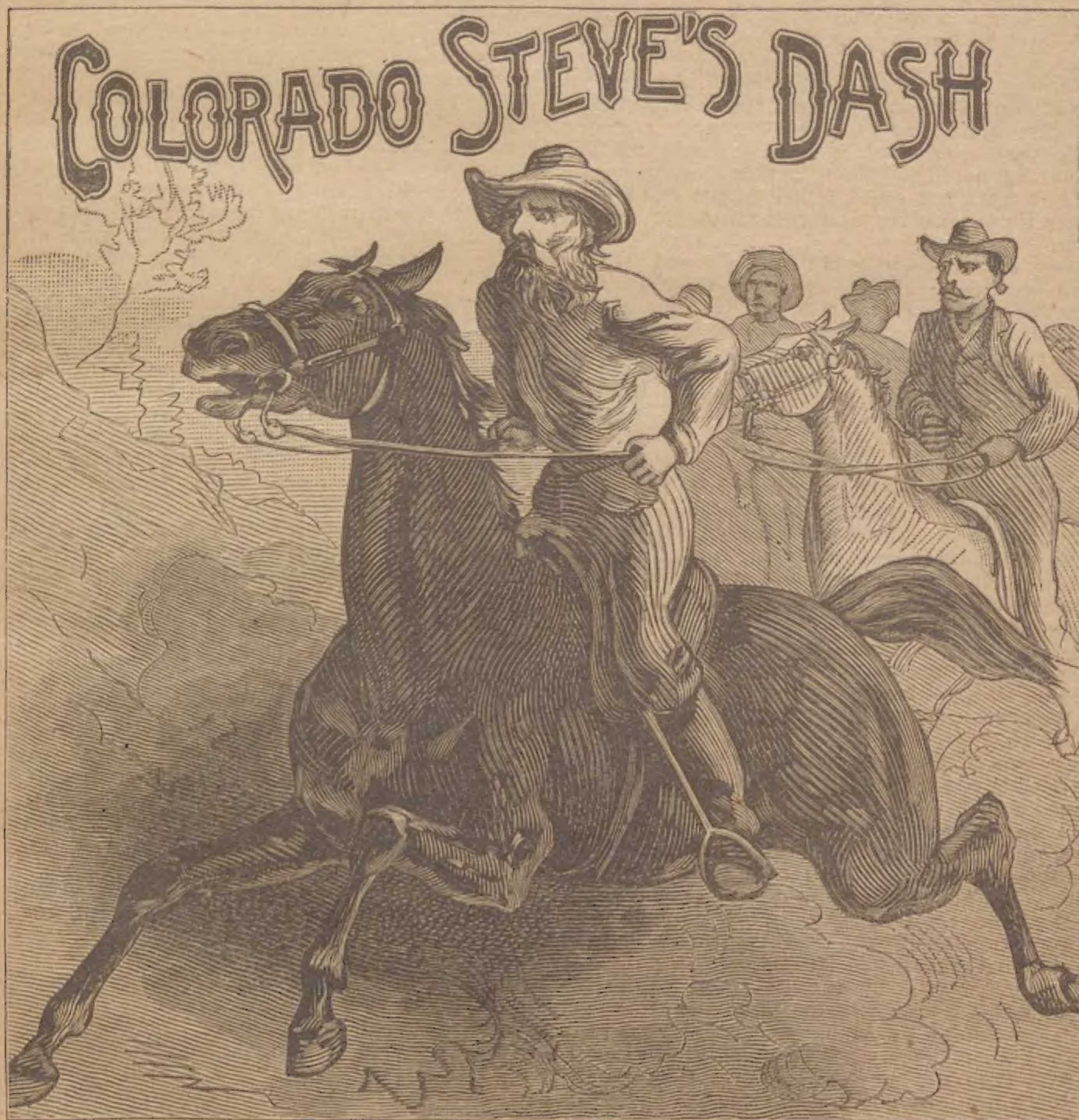
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AT THIS MOMENT OLD BUNCOMB, SURROUNDED BY THE SETTLERS, CAME DASHING
UP THE PASS.

By Phil Warner.

Colorado Steve's Dash:

OR,

Old Buncomb's Sure Shot.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT LEATHER JOE" SERIES,
"ALWAYS-ON-HAND," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DON'T BE SO FRESH!

SIX months before the date of our story an emigrant-train, composed of steady-going New England farmers, with their wives and children, found in the northeastern corner of New Mexico an oval-shaped glen, of not more than twelve or fifteen miles in circumference, shut in by low hills, and surrounded by the level prairie, like an oasis in the desert.

Naming this beautiful spot Glen Eden, they apportioned the land between them, turned up the rich black loam and scattered their seed, while they continued to live in their white-tilted wagons; then, when the rain and sunshine were at work for them, felled timber and built houses for themselves and inclosures for their stock.

Long before their grain had ripened, Glen Eden became a stopping-place for other adventurers to the new El Dorado, and for men of all nationalities and occupations, who were constantly drifting about the country, from the fickle gold-hunter, leaving certain "hard-luck" behind, in quest of "better luck next time," to the wealthy ranchero, seeking a market for a thousand head of cattle.

Commandant Thurston and his family lived in a house considerably more commodious within and pretentious without than the simpler folk who looked up to him as their leader. Like the castle of a feudal baron, his home was built with a view to defense in war, and was set upon a slight elevation near the head of the glen, and surrounded by a stockade.

Before the Glen Eden Inn, on a sultry afternoon, late in the season, when the grain was nodding its greenish-yellow heads, almost ready for the cradle, lounged two men of rather sinister aspect.

One was a giant in stature, with a shock of bristling red hair and a scrubby and tobacco-stained chin.

He was dressed in a slouch hat, gray woolen shirt, and brown canvas overalls, tucked into the tops of wrinkled and horn-hard cowhide boots. A fancy Indian bead belt supported a brace of huge revolvers, while a bowie ponderous in proportion was thrust into his boot-leg, after the style inaugurated in Mississippi.

From the color of his hair, this man was called Colorado—Spanish for red—Steve.

His companion was a dapper little Spaniard, arrayed in all the gaudy splendor of a Mexican dandy. From the gay silk handkerchief wrapped about his head beneath his sombrero, to the jingling spurs that adorned the heels of his morocobottas, he was "got up to kill!"

Colorado Steve was balancing his huge body on the hitching-bar, hacking with his bowie the wood between his pendulous legs, while Senor Ramirez stood with one elegantly-booted foot on the edge of the water-trough, nervously lashing his instep with a riding-whip.

"*Mira!*" [Behold!] he suddenly exclaimed, with a stare of mingled hate and admiration and hungry desire that was little short of satanic. "The commandant's daughter!—the fair Senorita Ruth!"

"Waal," said Colorado Steve, looking with dull interest in the direction taken by his companion's eyes, "ef that thar tow-head is *your* style, ye're welcome to her; but give me the black-eyed Venus that's a-swingin' an' a-swayin' beside her, like a limber statoo. Hang yer midgets! A man wants somethin' ur nothin' fur his money when he invests in a housekeeper."

"*Caspita!*" hissed the Spaniard, with a serpent side-glance of disgust at his companion: then, schooling his face to more winning looks, he began to plume himself after the manner of the "masher" the world over.

Ruth Thurston was petite and flaxen-haired, with peach-bloom cheeks, eyes like a wildwood violet, and lips the color of the inner surface of a sea-shell. She carried her broad-brimmed straw hat, filled with prairie flowers, basket-wise, with her arm through the knotted ribbons. She was crowned with a loosely-woven garland, with trailing ends mingling with her disheveled hair.

Madeline Fortescue was a rustic goddess, fair and tall, with her purple-black hair braided in a single heavy plait and coiled about the top of her head like a tiara. Instead of flowers, she bore a sheaf of grasses and ferns on her arm. Her complexion was a pure dead white; but her lips were full and of a deep, rich scarlet.

At sight of the men they would have to encounter before the tavern, gentle Ruth stopped swinging her hat and let the song die on her lip, while she drew nearer to her companion, the soft bloom fading out of her cheek.

"Look, Maddie!" she said in a low tone, "there is that horrid Ramirez! Can't we pass to the other side of the road, and avoid meeting him face to face?"

"Not we!" replied the bolder Madeline, with a flash of the eye and a proud lifting of the head, while two spots of angry vermilion appeared in her cheeks. "If there were no other objection, it would be letting them see that we attach too much importance to their insolence."

As the girls came up, Senor Ramirez, doffing his hat with a grace that would have become a cavalier, stepped across their path, so as to intercept the commandant's daughter.

"Pardonn, Meez Tourstonn!" he said, bowing low, with a smile that was even more calculated to frighten the innocent girl than his frown. "If it will please you, of your gracious—"

But with a murmur of apprehension, faint-hearted little Ruth had shrunk close to the side of her companion, clutching her hand spasmodically, and staring from behind her at the man who had presumed to address her, as a frightened child peers from behind its mother's dress.

Brave Madeline had taken a cross-step before her *protegee*, so as to oppose her dauntless front

and blazing eyes to the insinuating Spaniard, and had lifted her arm with a gesture that would have done honor to a queen of the Amazons.

"Allow us to pass, sir!" she demanded, eying him unflinchingly while the hectic of annoyance fled from her cheek, to give place to white-lipped indignation. "You are insolent! What right have you to stop us in the open street?"

Senor Ramirez bowed even lower before this haughty young queen, with the smile of the quivering lip, while his eyes seemed to dart serpent tongues of fury at her from under his black brows.

"Pardon, senorita!" he said, not yielding his place. "My address was to the gracious daughter of the commandant."

"That was very evident, sir!" retorted Madeline, as firmly as he; "but the daughter of the commandant does not know you, and, what is more, has no desire to. Step out of our path, or you will learn that the women of Glen Eden cannot be insulted with impunity!"

Thus far Colorado Steve had sat with a broad grin of amusement and admiration on his repulsive phiz. He now burst into a gruff:

"Haw! haw! haw! haw!"

Senor Ramirez turned livid with rage.

"The senorita is quite tragic for the daughter of a tiller of the soil!" he sneered, with a still deeper bow. "But it is for the lady of nobler descent to dismiss one whose respect is as profound as his admiration."

"You insolent loafer!" cried the Yankee girl, stamping her foot and clinching her hand.

"Come away, Maddie!" cried Ruth, dragging at her companion's sleeve. "Let's go into the tavern," and turning to beat a hasty retreat, she espied just appearing in the doorway, a champion to whom she appealed, all in a panic.

"Oh, Sidney! Sidney!"

He was a fine young stripling of not more than seventeen or eighteen, with a frank, fearless countenance, and wearing the full buckskin dress of the border hunter. His hair dark chestnut, and his eyes gray, with the piercing glance of an eagle's. His form, although not yet filled out to the proportions of manhood, showed that no mean muscular development lay beneath the close-fitting buckskin.

He was Madeline Fortescue's brother, and by the impetuosity of his assault, in hostile fight or friendly contest, had won the sobriquet of Little Tornado.

In this instance he proved that the name was well deserved; for scarcely was his name past the lips that—shall we tell it so soon?—he loved, when he swooped down upon Ramirez, it seemed with a single bound.

That persistent gallant received warning just in time to partially parry a blow that would have knocked him over the water-trough into the muddy pool that the horses' hoofs had made on the other side; but he staggered under the impetus of the body that collided with his as if shot out of a mortar, barely saving himself from sprawling with his pure Castilian nose in the dirt.

"Waal, now, I reckon this hyar business belongs to me!" cried Colorado Steve, and leaping from the hitching-bar, he caught Little

Tornado by the throat almost at the instant of the shock that overthrew his partner, and by a skillful twist and an exertion of his great strength threw him on his back.

The women both screamed with fright at this misadventure of their young champion; but now the whilom timid Ruth, instead of flying as she had been on the point of doing, found courage—where the gentlest of her sex always do, in her love—to spring to his side, to lift his head from the ground.

Such was her purpose; but he was up before she had more than touched him.

However, another was before him. From round the corner of the building, in the direction of the stables, had appeared a man who in point of physique need ask little favor of even Colorado Steve.

His garments, of stout material selected for service rather than show, were worn carelessly, yet not without a certain free grace. His full beard was so straggling and unkempt that at first glance one would be apt to set him down as a rough old scout or guide. A second, more scrutinizing look might give the impression that a tasteful barber and gents' furnisher would make a very marked change in his appearance.

He answered without reluctance to the name of Old Buncomb, though Miss Fortescue never heard him so addressed or referred to without a thrill of indignant protest.

As a fact, this name, based on the Yankee story of a lawsuit in which a "buncomb" fence is defined as "boss high, bull strong, and pig tight," was a compliment to Hugh Bunker's physical prowess and personal trustworthiness.

"Waal, I swear!" was Old Buncomb's brief comment on the situation, and picking Senor Ramirez up from the ground, he soused him into the horse-trough with a splash that sent the water flying over every member of the party.

They all seemed disposed to forgive him, save and except only Senor Ramirez, who scrambled to his feet and stood up in what water was left out of the troughful that had received him, gasping and spluttering and blinking his eyes and holding his arms away from his body, while the water trickled in musical rills from his wilted finery.

Colorado Steve was mighty tickled, though he felt called upon to spring at Old Buncomb, whipping out his bowie.

But spry Little Tornado was on his feet again, and appeared before him with a cocked revolver, which he thrust fairly into the giant's face.

"Let up, sweetheart!" cried Little Tornado in accents which had a clear, metallic ring in them which meant mischief, as did the steady light in his gray eyes.

"My bantam," replied the giant, looking down upon the boy who braved him, "ye're little, but ye're loud. I hear ye!"

And quite good-naturedly he returned to his boot-leg the weapon which he would cheerfully have sheathed under Old Buncomb's ribs, and resumed his seat on the hitching-bar as quietly as if nothing unusual had happened.

"*Mil diablos!*" screamed Senor Ramirez, who had by this time sufficiently recovered his pres-

ence of mind to leap out of the drinking trough, "are we to have no revenge, then? Blood of the martyrs! I would have the hearts of these accursed *Americanos*!

And standing with his back curved and his head thrust forward, while his shortened lip showed his teeth set edge to edge, he made quick clutches with his hands, as if he were in imagination tearing those indispensable organs out of his enemies' bodies.

"Jest so," drawled Colorado Steve, as if his partner had expressed a very natural and quite ordinary desire; "but I wouldn't take 'em now."

His late opponents stared at his strange colleague who took the business of chaffing his partner out of their hands.

Steve himself seemed to be unconscious of any incongruity in this. He was quite serious. The fact was that, although he "ranged" with the Spaniard, he had a borderman's thorough-going contempt for him as a "cowardly Greaser," and took no pains to conceal the fact. Ramirez often writhed under this scorn; but he found Steve too useful to break with him.

Now, however, maddened by this public mockery—for quite a little crowd had gathered from within the tavern and the stables—he shrieked out a string of Spanish imprecations, and swore by the bones of his ancestors to have the heart's blood of every one there present.

"Thar! thar! that'll do, Johnny!" said his unsympathetic partner, with some show of impatience. "Hain't you white-livered Greasers got nothin' at all in ye but jest wind? Ye make me dog sick, I'll sw'ar! Hold off when ye've got yer stomach full—that's my motto."

Whereupon the victim of insult added to injury turned upon his disaffected partner, and fell to upbraiding him for his desertion.

Colorado Steve abandoned his perch on the hitching-bar, strode up to the exasperated Spaniard, coolly took him by the collar, and turning to Old Buncomb, asked, as if making inquiry as to the best disposal of a petulant child:

"What shall I do with him, boss? I feel sorter 'sponsible fur him when he gits this hyar way, the which it's more frequenter than you'd think."

"I'll tell you what you shall do with him!" interposed Little Tornado, with no abatement of his resentment. "You will take him out of this settlement, and yourself with him; and you will make him understand—not forgetting to keep a share of the knowledge for yourself—that if he is ever caught within the circumference of these hills again, he will be tied up to a tree and treated to twenty cuts of a rawhide over his bare back!"

Colorado Steve turned to Old Buncomb with a nod and a grin, and observed with confidential enthusiasm:

"But *ain't* he a stinger?"

Then turning again to Little Tornado, he said:

"Thankee! thankee! But ef this hyar pore pickin's had your pluck along o' his savy, he'd flax ye yet. Maybe before ye git through with it, me an' him will manage to give ye some leetle

show fur the time you've put into the thing, as it is."

Surely no one but Colorado Steve ever delivered a threat in so friendly a tone, and with so genial a smile. The ladies, though they heard every word, were so completely misled by his manner that they did not catch their significance.

Senor Ramirez, however, knew him well enough to understand that the game was not yet up, though he yielded the first hand. He therefore the more readily submitted to be led away.

Old Buncomb knew a thing or two about men; and when the pair had mounted their horses and ridden out of the glen, Senor Ramirez shaking his fist and swearing eternal vengeance, while Colorado Steve waved his hand in friendly fashion and grinned his good will—when the ladies had been escorted home, congratulating themselves and complimenting their champions on the happy issue of the fracas—then he said to Little Tornado:

"Boy, we hain't heared the last o' the Outcasts o' the Glen, ye onderstand!"

And Little Tornado replied:

"Let em come! I allow they'll find us one too many for 'em!"

"I hope so. I hope so," returned Old Buncomb, meditatively.

On the outside of the hills that shut in Glen Eden, looking toward the west, where the serrated peaks loomed blue in the distance, stood a girl shading her eyes with her hand, while she gazed after the retreating outcasts as they skimmed the prairie with the fleet, loping gait to which plains horses are trained.

She was tall and as straight as an arrow. Her brown skin declared her Indian blood; but it was toned by a Caucasian mixture to a clear, smooth olive, through which the rich tide of life mantled in her cheeks with that loveliness which sometimes, but not always, comes of blended races. Her features, following the European mold, borrowed an uplifted nobility from the barbaric pride of one line of her ancestors. Her hair, straight and coarse, and of a dead black, hung down her back in a single heavy plait. Her dress was civilized, if we except the moccasins she wore, but was tricked out with bits of savage ornament which well became her wild beauty.

This girl, with the stoicism of her mother's people, stood as motionless as a statue, gazing out over the prairie, until the figure of the horsemen dwindled to mere specks in the distance, only distinguishable because in motion, and lost beyond recovery the moment the eye was taken off of them—and then vanished among the foot-hills. Only her eagle eye could have followed them so far.

The expression of her face, clouded with brooding melancholy, never changed. When at last she turned away with a profound sigh, she walked with drooping head and sad eyes fixed immovably on the ground, and with a tread as heavy as if her lithe limbs, that one felt might outleap the roe, were loaded with chains.

What were the Outcasts of the Glen to her?

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CHAPTER II.

"TROUBLE BEGINS."

"OH, how beautiful! And, see! see! what a sweet little fawn! Oh, Sidney!—don't shoot!"

But the petition came too late. The sharp, spat-like crack of a carbine was heard and lost with the abruptness with which sounds die on the open prairie, where there is nothing to prolong the echo, and a doe, which had just sprung from the cover of a motte which dotted the plain like an overgrown clump of shrubbery in a landscape garden, leaped into the air and fell in a heap, while a fawn, which had followed its dam too late to purchase her safety through the pity its beauty and helplessness inspired, ran round the quivering and feebly-struggling body, whimpering plaintively—and, lastly, a stag sped away like the wind.

"Oh, what a pity!—what a perfectly dreadful pity!" sighed tender-hearted Ruth Thurston, quick tears suffusing her blue eyes. "Sidney, how could you?"

"But, Ruth," pleaded the too skillful marksman, "how could I know about the fawn, which you yourself did not see until it was too late?"

"Well, anyway, it seems cruel to kill such innocent, helpless creatures at all."

And leaping from her horse, which was too well-trained to need hitching, she plucked a handful of tender grass, and holding it out invitingly, approached the timid orphan with words of endearment and sympathy, spoken in low, crooning intonations.

"Well, for a girl who loves venison as well as you do, that seems to me a little ungracious!" said young Fortescue, with a good-natured smile. "But I'm sorry to have distressed you—I needn't say that."

However, Ruth was too busy striving to win the confidence of the little animal to listen to reproach or regrets.

Her companions—Sidney, Madeline and Old Buncomb—sat their horses quietly, so as not to increase the difficulties of the task, while they awaited the issue.

After leaping away several times, the fawn stopped and stretched its neck out toward her, waving its dainty muzzle up and down while it snuffed the air; then, as she sunk softly down on the grass, still inviting it with extended hand and wooing murmurs, it approached her cautiously, step by step, until it could nibble her white fingers. As she drew the hand slowly toward her, the little creature followed, so that presently she had her arms about its neck, and was kissing it and crying over it; and the conquest of love and pity was complete.

"Oh! isn't it lovely? Poor little thing!" she murmured, taking a ribbon from her own throat to tie about its neck. "How it pants and trembles! And just see the tears in its eyes! If it were a baby it couldn't cry more naturally. Oh, I mean to keep it and bring it up so tenderly that it will never miss its poor dead mamma!"

The others now drew near, but the little animal shrunk close to the side of its first confidante, so that Ruth laughed and cried together with delight, as she hugged it to her, murmuring:

"Oh! do you see? It loves me already! Was there ever anything half so sweet? Maddie, you can't coax it away from me. Oh, you little love!"

This innocent sport engrossed all of them so that the time passed unheeded, until Old Buncomb suddenly woke to the fact that the sun hung just above the snowcapped peaks that bordered the western horizon.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed sharply. "It's getting late! We'll have to let up on this foolery, if we want to get hot johnny-cake for supper."

"But what shall I use for a leash?" cried Ruth, far more interested in her fawn than in her supper.

But her words were cut short by a sharp cry from Old Buncomb.

From the force of habit he had swept the plain with his eye, until it was suddenly arrested by some distant object. Then with that startled cry he put one foot in the stirrup, sprung so as to place the other in the saddle, and stood upright on his horse's back.

One lightning glance, that shot like a dart straight to its mark, and he leaped to the ground again, shouting:

"To horse! to horse! The red devils are sweeping down upon us like the wind!"

Catching Madeline off her feet, he set her in her saddle before she had time for a second breath. Leaving Sidney to perform the same office for Ruth, he bounded to his own place without using the stirrups.

Sidney was used to situations where life and death were determined by the seizing upon or letting slip a second of time. He knew that when Old Buncomb sent forth such a note of warning, it was no time to palter. So without stopping to look for himself—there would be plenty of time for that when he was well in the saddle—he cried sharply:

"Maid!"

But Ruth's little mare sprung to his side as promptly as if she had been a human being, instead of a dumb brute.

To swing a young lady, especially if she is pretty, from the ground to her saddle, is a very romantic thing; so it is a pity that all lovers are not equal to the task.

Sidney confessed his inability by resting his hand, palm upward, on his knee.

The lightness with which Ruth leaped to her seat, scarcely touching his hand with her dainty foot, made it look as if it would have been an easy task.

Even with life in the balance, her love was not lost in selfishness.

"Oh! it breaks my heart to leave my poor little fawn! If I could only hold it in my arms!"

But men's hearts are of tougher material. No one answered her. Sidney's eyes shot over the prairie as he bestrode his steed.

Some distance out from the foot-hills, and the less clearly discernible because they were between the eye and the sun, with the shadowed landscape at their backs, he saw a long line of horsemen, sweeping across the plain like a flock of wild ducks.

His practiced eye told him that they were a band of Apaches, perhaps a hundred strong.

It was evidently their purpose to throw forward their flanks, surround the group, and so take them all alive.

At sight of the horsemen the girls were dismayed, and were on the point of lashing their horses into a perfect stampede-pace in the opposite direction, where, on the rim of the horizon, the verdure-clad hills which inclosed Glen Eden stood out in bold relief against the sky.

"Keep cool!" cried Old Buncomb. "We have start enough to keep them at a safe distance; and nothing is gained by frightening your horses."

Submitting to his dictation, they put their horses into the swinging lope with which they could cover mile after mile of the level prairie without abatement of speed. It was really very rapid, but it seemed agonizingly slow to the girls when from the rear was borne to their ears a chorus of furious yells.

"Do you think they intend to attack the glen?" asked Sidney.

"I do," replied Old Buncomb.

"Then our people ought to be warned."

"I was about to propose that."

"Couldn't you leave the girls to me, and by veering off to the south, run the glen lengthwise, and reach the stockade about the time we did?"

Old Buncomb looked at his companion and laughed.

"You're a cool youngster," he said.

Little Tornado flushed quickly and hotly.

"Why? What's the matter with that proposition?" he asked, with brightening eye.

"Oh, nothing. I was only admiring the grace with which you took the man's part on yourself and gave me the boy's."

"Boy's!" cried Little Tornado, now thoroughly roused, for if anything in the world nettled him it was to be considered in anything short of manhood.

And to have his youth thrown in his teeth in the hearing of Ruth Thurston!

"If you call me a boy, I should like to know where you get your men?"

Old Buncomb laughed again, a low, prolonged chuckle. The air of this young bantam so tickled his midriff that he forgot the probable effect of letting his amusement be seen.

Little Tornado's anger burst into a blaze.

"You can look after your lady, and I will look after mine; and the glen can go to the—"

"Oh, Sidney! Sidney!" broke in Ruth, shocked beyond words to tell.

"Well, a man is made of flesh and blood, ain't he?" was Little Tornado's defense.

"But then Mr. Bunker is older than you," urged Ruth, gently.

"Oh, yes! he's old enough!" cried Little Tornado, with a chuckle on his side.

At that his sister flushed from chin to temple.

"Sidney Fortescue, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she cried. "If you have a spark of manhood about you, you will apologize at once for such rudeness."

"I haven't—not a spark! I am surprised that you should expect it, after Old Buncomb has just told you of my deficiency in that respect. So, you see, he's the last one to demand an apology on that score."

But Little Tornado was now in that sort of good humor which we enjoy when we feel that we have given our neighbor as good as he sent.

"Sidney!" appealed little Ruth, very faintly, feeling worse and worse that he of whom she was generally so proud should "behave so."

"Meanwhile," said Miss Fortescue, with haughty displeasure, "the helpless woman and children must be exposed to the most cruel of deaths that your vanity—"

"There! there! I'm off!" said Little Tornado, suiting the action to the word. "But remember," he called back to Ruth, "I abandon you at your own bidding."

Ruth did not reply in words, but gave him a look that ought to have healed any wounds he had received elsewhere. Whatever others might say, he was a hero to her!

Neither of the ladies had dared to look at Old Buncomb, fearing to encounter a cloud of resentment on his face. But it was because they did not know him well. He was mightily delighted to have the ladies take his part so warmly.

"Don't spare horse-flesh!" he called out to Little Tornado, pleasantly. "You've got a good mount. Now let's see you make it tell. Remember, women and children take more time to move than men."

"You shall be the judge!" answered Little Tornado, now yielding to the excitement of a contest; "and if you do the man's part as well as I do the boy's, we'll shake hands on it!"

By this time his divergent course had increased the gap between them so as to preclude further conversation; but the distance was not too great for Ruth to flash a glance of grateful admiration over to him.

Then he dug spurs into his horse's flanks, and skimmed away over the rolling prairie like an albatross riding the ocean swells.

His horse with his muzzle thrust forward until his head was in a straight line with his neck, hugged the ground until he seemed to float on the top of the coarse prairie grass, with his legs swinging free under him.

Thus he clove the air like a thunderbolt, widening the gap between him and the pursuing savages, and advancing over his course much more rapidly than his friends did over theirs.

From time to time Little Tornado looked back to see how they were getting on, when suddenly he brought up with a cry of dismay.

Something had happened to the other party. He could see but one coursing ahead, now at a speed which showed that the horse was being urged to the utmost.

The distance was too great to be sure of even the sex of the rider, though he thought that he could now and then catch the flutter of a loose garment.

A moment later he discovered a second flying figure. Here as before he seemed to make out the flutter of a dress.

Running his eyes back and forth between the mouth of the pass for which they were making and the pursuing savages, he assured himself that these two figures were the only ones to be seen.

What did this signify? If these were the girls—and the fact that they were separated

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seemed to tell in that direction, for he knew that, while Old Buncomb was too well mounted to be left behind, he would not abandon either of his charges, however hard beset—what had then become of the scout? And if the girls, which was lagging behind?

In either case it meant sharp pain for him. In such a strait who could make choice between sister and sweetheart?

With a sinking heart, Little Tornado measured the distance, and saw that it would be madness to attempt to reach them. The savages, leaving him to go his way, had kept straight on after the others, and were now nearer them than he was.

His only hope was to keep on, flashing through the glen from end to end, and meet them from the direction of the stockade, if it were not then too late!

Setting his teeth, and bending forward until he nearly lay along his horse's neck, he now goaded him more fiercely, more persistently, than ever.

Into the glen he dashed, discharging his revolvers, one in either hand, and yelling at the top of his lungs.

Men who were mowing hay, dropped the scythe and ran toward their houses, without waiting to make out exactly what he said. Others who were using horses, cut them loose from stone-boat or log-chain, leaped upon their backs, and lashed them with the ends of the reins.

All knew Little Tornado, and that he would not spread such an alarm as this for a "lark."

All in a moment this peaceful spot was turned into a pandemonium. Men shouted, women screamed, and children wailed with terror at the unwonted excitement of their elders.

As an Express train sucks dry leaves after it in the eddy which it makes, Little Tornado seemed to gather up armed men, who with their families followed on in his wake as fast as they could.

Never was such a ride. The boy, half crazed with suspense, had annihilated space and time. All was wild excitement behind him; but his heart sunk as it appeared to him that the peace before was disturbed only by the sounds he followed almost as fast as they flew before him.

What had become of Old Buncomb—his sister—Ruth?

CHAPTER III.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

WHEN Little Tornado had left his friends at a pace which carried him ahead of them as well as to the right, three pairs of eyes followed him admiringly.

Although she had sided against him, as sisters generally do, in his tilt with Old Buncomb, Madeline could not help being proud of her brother.

Old Buncomb cast a sly glance at Ruth, and saw her face aglow and her eyes sparkling. Then he said:

"There isn't his match of his years, between the two oceans!"

Ruth flashed a grateful look at the speaker,

and crimsoned to the roots of her hair with pleasure.

"You are not—not—annoyed with him?" she ventured, timidly.

"With Little Tornado?—a boy that I'm proud to call my pard? I guess not?" cried Old Buncomb, heartily.

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

And with a swelling heart the little maiden drew nearer to the scout and kept this place for the rest of their ride.

It was fortunate for her that her generous heart prompted such a manifestation of gratitude, for while they were in full course her horse stepped into a gopher-hole, and was thrown upon his head so that he turned a complete somersault.

It happened that Old Buncomb was looking at her when the accident occurred, and with the quickness of thought, for which men whose whole life consists in meeting emergencies impossible to forecast become noted, he threw out his arm and snatched her from her saddle to his horse's withers.

As the little mare went crashing to the earth, Madeline uttered a scream of fright, and reined in her own horse, shuddering at the thought of seeing her companion crushed beneath the falling weight of horse-flesh. But instead of a bloody and dirt-disfigured corpse, a flutter of skirts, as Old Buncomb swept by her, showed her pretty Ruth, somewhat tumbled, but otherwise her rosy self, in his arms.

"Keep on!" he shouted. "We are all right."

Dazed by the sudden alternation between peril and safety, and by the yell of delight that went up from a hundred savage throats, Madeline spurred her horse up to the pair.

Old Buncomb was almost choked by the convulsive hug with which terrified Ruth clung about his neck; but he seemed very well pleased with that part of the programme.

Albeit not a man to trifle in the face of their great peril, yet he sought to impart confidence to the girls who were so dependent on his coolness, by making light of the matter.

So he said teasingly to Ruth, who was sobbing and shuddering with horror at her narrow escape:

"I wonder if you would take it so much to heart, if it were Little Tornado with his arm about you, instead of a rough old codger like me? Heigho! that's the disadvantage of not being young and handsome. But I am glad that he is not where he can see me. I shall have to bribe his sister not to tell him. It is not so much that I object to being shot; but it would be a thousand pities to spoil his lovely complexion, by having him turn green with jealousy and livid with envy."

"Oh, you horrid thing!" cried little Ruth, who from being as wan as any lily with fear, now rivaled the very peonies with her blushes.

"Waal! waal! here's a gratitude for you," cried Old Buncomb, with mock indignation. "I've risked being shot by that hot-headed young pirate, just that you might escape getting your dress dirty; and you tell me to my face that I am a horrid thing! If I ever—"

"But you are! I say it again!" pouted Ruth. "Even saving my life—I don't deny that I owe

everything to you—but does it give you the right to laugh at me? I have a mind to jump down—"

"And walk home. Ha! ha! ha!"

Then he turned to Madeline and said, looking steadily at her, to show that there was more in his words than appeared on the surface:

"Ride ahead, Miss Madeline, and get the glen out to see the champion lady walkist. Tell them that we guarantee to show some of the tallest getting over the ground on record. You'll have to be spry—but that horse can stand it—or we shall be so close behind you that the performance will be over before the audience gets seated."

Madeline shot a lightning glance of inquiry into his eyes. Was there real danger to him and Ruth? Did he fear that his horse, with its double load, might be overtaken? Was she being sent forward to summon help?

He saw by the sudden blanching of her face, by the spasmodic quiver that ran through her form, by the quick parting of the lips, by the speaking eyes, that she comprehended him.

It was lucky that, as she sat before Old Buncomb, Ruth's back was toward Madeline, so that she did not see these suspicious symptoms.

After a mighty effort to stifle the scream that struggled for utterance in her throat, Madeline gained control of her voice sufficiently not to startle Ruth as she said:

"Seriously, they ought to be warned to have the stockade in readiness. This horse is not doing half what he is equal to. Why shouldn't I as well as my brother do something to increase the chances of those poor people? I might get enough men together to hold the savages in check in the pass, while those who are furthest from the stockade would have so much more time to reach it."

While speaking she urged her horse ahead, so that when Ruth quickly turned her head she might not see the white face that belied these brave words.

"Oh! are you going to leave us?" she cried, her eyes flying wide with dismay, before she had time to think of anything but the terror of being last in that fearful race for life.

But instantly her generous heart sacrificed self to the needs of others; and she cried, remorsefully:

"Oh yes! do, go! Don't lose a moment! You can't do us any good by delaying; and you may be the means of saving the little children and their mothers, who will be so frightened that they will hardly know which way to run. God speed you, you dear, brave Maddie!"

Madeline did not look round. She dared not! She felt as if her heart would burst. It might be the last time she would ever hear the voice of her loved friend. It might be the last she would ever see of either her or Old Buncomb— Ah! Old Buncomb! that made her sick and dizzy with a swooning of the heart which was different from her grief for her friend, deep and sincere though it was.

With set teeth and gaze fixed upon that opening in the hills where life seemed to beckon her forward, while death pursued hard upon her heels, freezing her with the shadow it cast be-

fore, she goaded her horse until every muscle was strained to the utmost and every tendon was tense as the string of a steel bow, and so besought Heaven in dry-eyed agony to stretch forth a succoring hand, and pluck her loved ones from the cruel death that menaced them!

Behind her, Ruth clung more closely about Old Buncomb's neck, now that she realized that he was her sole dependence; and gazing over his shoulder at the red devils who divided their time between lashing their horses and brandishing their weapons, gazing at them with wildly-dilated eyes, and blood-curdling shudders that seemed to begin at her extremities and end in a spasm in her heart, she asked, in a quivering whisper close to his ear, as if fearful that she might be overheard even at that distance:

"Are they as far behind as at the start? Oh, look!"

Old Buncomb glanced over his shoulders, and replied, with a ring of assurance in his voice:

"Don't be afraid, little one! We are holding our own; and that is all we want. Let them come on! They'll get more cracked crowns than half-pence at the Glen Eden mint! That's the kind of coin we turn out there for the Government pets!"

At every bound Madeline gained upon both friends and foes, until when she had reached within four or five miles of the glen, her heart was brought into her mouth by the sight of some one riding out from among the hills toward her.

Tearing loose a red scarf which she wore about her waist as an ornament, she waved it above her head and cried out at the top of her lungs, though she knew that the distance was far too great to be leaped by her woman's voice.

Instead of going back to summon aid, as she wished, and thus saving the time it would take to traverse that stretch of prairie, the rider evidently took it as a signal of distress calling upon him personally to come to the relief of the doubly burdened and lagging horse; for he dug spurs into his horse's flanks, and dashed forward at a pace that showed that the animal he bestrode was a good one and fresh.

Madeline could have cried with vexation.

"Go back! go back!" she shouted again and again, trying to convey her wish by dropping her scarf and waving him away with the palm of her hand toward him.

But the distance was so great that he mistook this repellent gesture for beckoning him to hasten; and so redoubled his efforts.

"Oh! for mercy's sake go back!" cried Madeline, when he had come within sound of her agonized voice. "Get all the men you can to come through the pass and check the savages. Go! go! Your horse is fresher than mine."

The man wheeled his horse and rode beside her, crying excitedly:

"Won't it be better to go and lighten Old Buncomb of his load? We kin make a flyin' change, an' lose no time."

Had this been another like Old Buncomb, or her brother, she would not have hesitated to let him carry out the plan; but, albeit a good-heart-

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ed rustic, he was unfortunately clumsy, as some
otherwise excellent people are; and she shud-
dered at the thought of intrusting her friend's
life to his skill in so ticklish a maneuver as
changing a woman from one horse's back to an-
other at full speed.

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However, the decision that she was called
upon to make was so momentous that she hesi-
tated to take the whole responsibility on her-
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"Look back," she said. "Is Mr. Bunker
signaling you?"

She was confident that if Old Buncomb want-
ed personal help, he would find some way of
making his wish known.

"No," answered the young farmer, when he
had looked over his shoulder.

"Then do not lose another moment! Push
ahead as fast as you can, and get the men out—
half a dozen will be better than delaying too
long for more—to meet us in the pass. After
you have got ahead of me, so that it will be seen
how I have directed you, you can look round;
and if Mr. Bunker wants you to act differently,
he will call you back."

"You've got a head on your shoulders, Miss
Fortescue!" exclaimed the rustic, in a burst of
admiration; and then without waiting to see
how his compliment was received, he plunged
the rowels into the quick flesh and dashed for-
ward on his mission.

She was rejoicing to see how much fresher his
horse was than her own, and reflected that of
course the Indians labored under the same dis-
advantage.

He made the pass nearly a mile in advance of
her, and when she came up she could hear—
though the intervening trees cut off her view—
the sounds of excitement in the glen, which
showed that he had faithfully executed his
trust.

Then came to her the prompting of kindly
charity.

"I can add nothing to what he has already
done," she said to herself. "But I shall have
time to warn Wild Zeph and her mother. In
the general excitement they will probably be
forgotten, living as they do outside of the
glen."

As she entered the pass she looked back.
About midway between her and the Indians,
Old Buncomb, though his horse was laboring
painfully, seemed to be holding his own with
the foremost of his pursuers. That they kept on
at full speed was no evidence that they yet
hoped to overtake him; for it would still be
their aim to reach the glen while it was in the
confusion of a surprise.

"Yes, I shall have ample time," reflected
Madeline; and she waved her scarf encourag-
ingly to her friends as she disappeared from
their view among the trees.

A moment later a handful of mounted men
swept by her. They did not stop for any inter-
change of words, but cheered her as they
passed.

Had any of them looked back, they might have
seen her wheel sharply into a bridle-path, to be
swallowed up by the dense foliage. But for
want of this knowledge, they naturally supposed

that she had kept on to the stockade, where she
would be in safety.

Before they reached the mouth of the pass
they heard the report of a rifle—then another,
and another, and another—following at rhyth-
mic intervals.

"That's a repeating rifle," exclaimed one of
the men.

At that instant they burst through the mouth
of the pass, in full view of the open prairie, with
its background of soaring peaks, on the apex of
one of which the sun rested like a star in the
diadem of a goddess. It was a majestic stage,
fit for the enactment of one of those awful
tragedies with which man's devilish ferocity
has filled the earth from the beginning.

Although the sun was in their eyes, the chase
was now near enough so that all the participants
could be clearly made out.

Reeking with sweat and flecked with foam
that flew from his muzzle at every gasping
breath, Old Buncomb's noble steed still bore on
at a heavy gallop.

Behind him came the Apaches, the line spread
out transversely, with which they had begun
the chase, now drawn together, so that, seen in
perspective, they looked like a compact body,
though in fact they were considerably strung
out over the the plain.

They were led by one who, riding with his
bridle-rein hanging on the neck of his horse,
brought a rifle to his shoulder at every few
leaps, and the cloud of white smoke that for an
instant hid his face, to be pierced at the next
bound, was followed by the sharp report which
told that another leaden messenger of death had
winged its flight.

At sight of his friends, Old Buncomb held up
his hand, signaling them to stop.

They drew rein in instant obedience. On the
border, men learn to depend upon one another's
judgment.

"That devil's tryin' his luck at long range,"
said one of the men. "Let Old Buncomb alone
to know whether the bullets is singin' too cluss
about his ears. You bet he ain't takin' no resks
with the commandant's daughter; an' ef he
says hold off, it's becuz thar ain't no call fur our
puttin' in."

"Gents, d'ye notice anythin' curi's about the
cuss that's coin' all this hyar shootin'?"

"No. What's the matter with him?"

"He ain't no Injun, ye onderstand."

At this announcement in a confident tone, the
men shaded their eyes and peered more narrow-
ly at the foremost pursuer.

Then followed ejaculations of surprise and
deep resentment. The renegade to his race is
loathed where a natural enemy is only hated.

But Old Buncomb was now so near at hand
that his friends set up a cheer, in the midst of
which he dashed through the opening in their
ranks which they made for his reception, and
they closed in about him.

"It is Colorado Steve," he said. "And I sup-
pose that Mexican devil is with him. To the
stockade, men! We're going to have hot work
to-night."

The men cheered Ruth, and she smiled—a
plaintive little smile—and thanked them.

But at this moment a horseman, wild-eyed

and haggard with distress, came down the pass, goading his horse to a breakneck pace, at sight of whom Ruth cried, hysterically:

"Papa! papa! oh, my darling papa!"

It was indeed the commandant. He wheeled to the side of Old Buncomb, and caught the hand that his child held out to him.

"Thank God! thank God!" he cried, in a choking voice. "I have my child still, safe and well! How can I ever repay you for what you have done for me to-day?"

And having kissed again and again the little hand he held in spite of the uneven motion of the horses as they galloped on, and left a tear on it, he put his hand with grateful affection on Old Buncomb's shoulder.

But Ruth was too overflowing with talk to allow Old Buncomb a chance to reply, if he felt disposed.

"And did Maddie tell you how he saved me from being killed outright by a terrible fall, when poor Maid broke her leg?"

"Madeline?" repeated Mr. Thurston. "I have not seen her. I was away from home when the terrible news of your peril was brought me. I feared that I should never see my darling's smile again!"

"Poor, dear papa! But have all our people been so well cared for as your foolish little daughter?"

And she blushed with pleasure to see how much interest had centered in her safety.

But her measure was not yet full, or rather it was to still more lavishly brim over; for while she spoke another rider was seen to approach, in as agonized suspense as her father had displayed.

This time it was Little Tornado; and he too would have one of her hands, and in his heart wanted to relieve Old Buncomb of her altogether, but that it would have been a rather ungracious thing to rob the hero of the hour of the honor of bearing her into the stockade as he had borne her so long and so well in the teeth of the enemy.

Even as it was, so impetuously and so openly did he urge his claim upon her, that, crimson with confusion, she was fain to snatch her hand away; while the men by whom she was surrounded grinned with enjoyment of the scene.

But her father smiled very kindly upon the young scamp, for all that!

So, in a body they dashed up to the stockade, into which the men of Glen Eden were hurrying their women and children like a lot of fluttering geese.

"But where's Maddie?" was Ruth's demand, the moment she was set upon her feet.

As she ran through the gate into the inclosure, she looked about for her friend, surprised that she was not at hand to meet her.

There was another who entered as eagerly expectant. If it is necessary to say that it was Old Buncomb, then we have told our story so far to little purpose. His only anxiety was to learn how bravely the girl bore up against the terrible strain that had been upon her.

But when Ruth repeated her question, and Madeline still failed to appear and answer for herself, a sense of fear smote home to his heart. Still his only thought was that she might have

been prostrated in the reaction after that long suspense. But when it appeared that no one had seen her after the squad of men who met her in the pass, then he was stricken with dismay, and ran to the gate of the stockade.

There he was met by a vision that froze the blood in his veins!

CHAPTER IV.

WILD ZEPH.

THE bridle-path down which Madeline urged her horse led to the shores of a lakelet embayed by the hills, yet fronting on the prairie. Into it flowed the water-courses that irrigated the glen, and out of it meandered a streamlet across the plain to its confluence with the Canadian River.

On its beach lay a flat-bottomed scow of rude construction, and a little way from the water's edge stood a hut among the trees, against the wall of which leaned a one-tined spear, with a deerskin thong tied to its handle—such an instrument as is commonly used by Indians; while near at hand hung a net and some fishing-lines.

Up to the door of this hut rode Madeline, and rapped upon it with the butt of her whip, crying:

"Zeph! Zeph! Open the door instantly! You are in peril of your life!"

No sound replied to her urgent summons.

"Dear! dear! she must be away from home!" exclaimed Madeline. "But I can not manage her mother alone, if she is in one of her obstinate moods—which she is sure to be! What shall I do?"

A moment she hesitated, listening for sounds of the chase which she knew was approaching on the wings of the wind. Then her generous impulses triumphed over her fears, and leaping from her horse, she thrust open the door and entered.

The hut was without fireplace or window, and contained not so much furniture as a stool. The earthen floor was covered with mats of braided rushes, save in the center, where three stones had their use indicated by the ashes lodged in their midst, as well as by a pot, smoky without and greasy within, which stood beside them. In one corner was a thicker layer of rushes covered with coyote skins. On this rude bed lay an Indian woman, on her back, with her black eyes wide open, and fixed immovably on the ceiling.

She was so haggard and wrinkled that she looked like a skeleton covered with time-worn leather.

She was covered with an old, tattered and dirty army blanket; but her skinny arms lay outside parallel beside her body.

Springing to the side of this old hag, yet instinctively gathering her skirts so that they should not touch the floor as she stooped, Madeline seized her by the shoulder and shook her, crying:

"Kiwanga, get up and come to the stockade. A crowd of Apaches—you know that they are at war with your people—are coming to attack the glen. There is not a moment to lose. Even now we may be too late. Where is Zeph? Oh! will you not listen to me?"

But she might as well have appealed to one of

the stone effigies carved on an old-time tomb. The hag lay as unresponsive as if she were a paralytic.

Knowing that this was sheer sullenness, extraordinary instances of which are not uncommon among all uncivilized races, Madeline was loth to leave her to the consequences of her perversity. But she must not forget that her own safety hung upon the chance of a moment.

After several fruitless efforts to win her attention, the girl became conscious that the doorway was darkened by some one whose approach she had not heard.

Whirling round with almost a shriek of terror, she stood face to face with the beautiful half breed whom the reader will remember as having watched the departure of the Outcasts of the Glen with manifestations of profound melancholy.

A word will tell who and what she was.

After the settlers had sown their grain, and while they were building their houses, she one day made her appearance among them, offering fish in exchange for anything they would give her. Her beauty at once made her enthusiastic friends, and when it was found that she had pitched a tepee on the border of the lake, it was resolved to adopt her into the community, if she could be induced to become a fixture. The men built her a hut, consisting of but four walls and a roof, yet a better protection against the weather than her tepee, with the promise that they would improve it as soon as they had more time, while the women gave her civilized clothes—which her old hag mother could not be induced to share—and took turns trying to enlighten her heathen ignorance of the Shorter Catechism and the Four Gospels.

She now stood bolt upright in the doorway, looking steadily and in silence at the maiden who had risked her life to warn her and her mother.

"Oh, Zeph!" cried Madeline, springing toward her with a look of relief.

But the imperious half-breed lifted her hand with so repellent a frown that Madeline shrunk back with astonishment and apprehension.

"Why, what is the matter?" she cried, lifting her hand to her breast, where her heart was palpitating so wildly that it nearly suffocated her.

"Why are you here?" demanded Wild Zeph, still barring the door with her person.

"I came to warn you and your mother of the terrible danger that is rushing down upon us all. A perfect swarm of Apaches are chasing Mr. Bunker and Ruth Thurston across the prairie to attack the glen. I have been trying to persuade your mother to get up and go with me to the stockade. Oh, Zeph! do not stand there wasting time! They will be here in a moment!"

"We will not go to the stockade," said Wild Zeph, firmly.

"Then you must let me go without you," said Madeline, despairing at this new opposition. "Hark! Do you not hear their yells? Oh, we shall all be lost!"

And she sprang toward the door, never dreaming that her passage would be contested.

But it was, Wild Zeph had repelled her im-

pulsive approach with her uplifted left hand. Now her right appeared from behind her. It flew up until it flanked her head, holding a glittering knife, the point of which menaced the girl who sought to pass her.

"You will not go to the stockade!" she said, as firmly as before.

"Merciful Heaven! what do you mean?" cried Madeline, shrinking back in white-lipped terror.

"That we will not go to the stockade," said the half-breed, as impassively as if she were a parrot or a talking machine.

"Oh! but you cannot detain me! You have no right to detain me! You dare not detain me!" panted Madeline, with agonized iteration.

"Your people have the right of the weakest," said the half-breed, with a sneering smile. "My people"—and her eyes blazed and her head was lifted proudly—"have the right of the strongest!"

There was no misunderstanding such a presentation of the case as this.

Madeline stared at her breathlessly, afraid to take up the challenge that glittered in her eyes and spoke in the hand that clutched the murderous knife.

It was the thought of blood that unnerved her—this girl who dared risk death to save a couple of strangers of an alien race.

"Listen a moment," she urged, trying to hold in restraint the wild terror that shook her, and speak in the soothing tones of conciliation. "You cannot have understood me. We are all in danger from the Apaches, you as well as I, and I have come to save you and your mother."

"Let them come," said Wild Zeph, unmoved.

"But I! You cannot wish to include me in your destruction! What have I ever done to you, Zeph? Have I not even now risked everything to do you a kindness? And your mother—it was to save her that I came. Oh! you cannot be so ungrateful as to wish me to suffer for my very goodness to you! And such cruelties!—worse than the most terrible death! Oh, Zeph! Zeph! where is your heart—your humanity!"

And losing all command over her emotion, in view of the horrible pictures of suffering her fancy painted—pictures too faithfully realized in the ruthless warfare which marks the death-grapple of the two races, the weaker of which is being slowly yet surely strangled, though in its death throes it rends its adversary cruelly—Madeline extended her hands in piteous supplication.

All this while, the hag, though perfectly aware of what was going on, never so much as moved an eyelid.

"Stand back!" commanded the half breed, clutching her knife more firmly, and once more raising it above her head, while her eyes glittered with a hate that seemed as if it must scorch like lightning wherever her glance fell.

"Zeph!—dear Zeph!"

So does fear make sycophants of us all!

"Stand back, I say!"

So does hate repudiate every claim of gratitude or humanity!

"Oh!—my horse! my horse!"

For at this moment, as Old Buncomb, sur-

rounded by the settlers, came dashing up the pass, the animal that had been tossing its head, rolling its eyes, pricking its ears forward, and snuffing the air, yielded to the excitement under which it had chafed, wheeled, and sped down the bridle-path to join its kind.

"I am lost!—I am lost!" cried Madeline, wildly. "Out of my path! You *shall* not stop me!"

And reckless of the immediate danger she sprung forward, to force a passage to freedom.

Instead of executing the menace of her knife, Wild Zeph dropped the weapon, and grappled with her prisoner.

Her strong right arm she threw about Madeline's waist. The left she thrust under her arm, and clutching her hair from behind, drew her head back until her pure white throat was strained so as to make a straight line from the end of her chin to her breast, while her eyes glared with strangulation.

A terrible struggle ensued; for Madeline, besides being strong, was goaded to frenzy by fear. But it was the struggle of the hare with the fangs of the hound in its throat.

Wild Zeph fought with set teeth, and hard, relentless eyes—with the silent ferocity of a bull-dog, which never loosens its grip while there is a quiver in its victim.

Thrusting her chin against the smooth, round throat that she had laid open to this painful attack, she tightened her arm about the slender waist, and forced Madeline backward until she tripped over the stones which we have described as forming a fireplace in the middle of the floor. So they fell to the ground together, the half-breed uppermost, and so close beside the shakedown upon which the old hag lay that one of Madeline's flying arms struck her.

She never moved.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE GATE OF THE STOCKADE.

It was not that the Apaches at that moment made their appearance, pouring through the pass, hideous in the barbaric paraphernalia of their warfare; but it was that before them careered a horse with an empty saddle!—Madeline's horse.

"My God!" cried Old Buncomb, with the agony of a strong man. "Men! men! I tell you that the girl never reached the stockade!"

Then wheeling around upon his companions, he stretched forth his hands in piteous appeal, crying:

"Forward with me to the rescue! If there is a spark of manhood here, let no one stay behind!"

And turning about, he was on the point of leaping through the gate, let who would follow, when he was seized by friends who were cool enough to see that such an act would be suicidal, while others shut the heavy barrier and dropped the ponderous oaken bar into its iron slots.

He neither heard nor heeded the Babel of cries with which he was appealed to on all sides. He shook them off and whirled upon them with so ghastly a face, such blazing eyes, that they quailed before the lava tide of his emotion; while through his voice quavered such cadences of anguish as told how mighty was the

love of this man, usually so cool and unconcerned, for the girl in whose behalf he now appealed to them.

"God in heaven!" he cried, with terrific energy, "are we to leave her to her fate?"

"Bunker! Bunker! this is madness!" shouted Mr. Thurston, putting his hand on the shoulder of the frenzied man. "Do you suppose that we are not distressed with you? But there are women and children here who must not be abandoned for so hopeless—"

"Old man! dare you stand to argue the case with me? Did I not bring you your daughter? What more do you require? Nothing!—nothing!" with a withering sneer. And then: "Stand out of my way!"

And with a sweep of his powerful arm, he hurled him away.

While this was going forward, a woman with streaming hair and pain-drawn face came rushing forward, stretching forth her hands, and crying:

"Madeline! My daughter, Madeline! Where's Madeline! In God's name, has no one seen her? Oh! I am a poor heart-broken mother! What shall I do?—what shall I do?"

Thus wailing and mourning and wringing her hands, she espied Little Tornado, and rushing up to him, seized hold of him with both shaking hands.

"Sidney! Sidney! where is your sister? Oh! do not tell me that you have not found her!"

Thus far Little Tornado had stood dumfounded. He had been told that it was Madeline who had brought the intelligence of the perilous situation in which she had left Ruth and Old Buncomb. He had taken it for granted that she had found refuge in the stockade. Only stopping to see his mother on her way to the same haven of security, he had sped down the pass to meet Ruth and her savior.

"She *must* be here—somewhere about!" he cried, helplessly. "Where else could she be? You have not looked. Why have you not called to her? Madeline! Madeline!"

And lifting his voice, through which ran a quiver of terror, he shouted her name in tones that must have been heard in any part of the stockade, even above all the hubbub that made it a very Babel.

Further than this, he was about to rush through the place in search of her, when a trampling of many hoofs drowned in a myriad-throated yell announced that the foe had arrived at the very gateway without.

Hearing this, the mother threw up her hands with a prolonged, quivering "O-o-h!" as if an arrow had pierced to her heart.

This drama between mother and son took place concurrently with the commandant's vain effort to recall Old Buncomb to reason.

Seeing her, the scout seized one of her wrists, to arrest her attention, and cried:

"I will fetch your daughter back to you!"

The distracted mother caught his hand with both her own, and pressing it against her aching bosom, murmured:

"God bless you, Mr. Bunker! He will help you to save her!—I know He will! Oh, He *can not* afflict me so sorely! O-o-h! O-o-h! O-o-h!"

And her distress ended in long-drawn wails of unspeakable anguish.

Maddened by this grief in concert with which his own heart bled, Old Buncomb sprung to the gate, snatched the bar from its fastenings, pushed open the barricade—which of course swung outward—and leaped through, into the very teeth of the savages who swarmed before it.

All this was done so suddenly that the besieged stood breathless with every barrier swept from between their cowering wives and children and the bloodthirsty foe.

But fear is a mightier weapon than force; and so terrific was Old Buncomb's onslaught, firing rapidly with a revolver in either hand, that the savages reined their horses round as on pivots; and for a moment there was a general stampeding, with flying heels and whisking tails.

However, there was a man at their head who never seemed to get excited. Colorado Steve saw that Old Buncomb was not the leader of a sortie, as the savages expected from his bold throwing open of the gate; and jumping at the chance to capture him before any one came to his support, he wheeled his horse so as to get between him and the gate.

In this maneuver he was quickly followed by Senor Ramirez and several of the Indians who had their wits under better control; and it looked as if Old Buncomb, who, heedless of the trap, seemed determined to cut his way through the confused crowd, was doomed to capture.

But love for his friend spurred Little Tornado to activity.

"Charge!" he shouted. "So good a man must not be lost so foolishly!"

And he, too, leaped through the yawning gateway.

Foolhardiness, like true heroism, is contagious. With a yell the whole force of the glen rushed after the boy, with only a vague idea that they were to rout the savages at a single blow.

But Little Tornado was not so infatuated as to expect such a miracle. He had a far more practical object in view—to rescue his friend and get back before the enemy could gain control of their horses, which were riding one another down in wild confusion.

Colorado Steve leaped from his horse, and springing upon Old Buncomb from the rear, dealt him a stunning blow on the head with the butt of his revolver. He then stooped and picked him up from the ground where he had fallen unconscious, evidently with the purpose of rushing among the savages with him beyond the reach of his friends.

But he should have looked to his own defense. Little Tornado was upon him with a rush that justified his name.

He, however, in turn, had his enemy—no less a person than Senor Ramirez, who tried to ride him down. But with lightning dexterity he dodged the horse, and seizing the Spaniard by the foot, pitched him out of his saddle in fine style, giving him an ugly fall, that came within an ace of breaking his precious neck!

He then made a second rush at Colorado Steve, who was by this time upright and ready to dash with his burden into the thick of the crowd of his allies.

In his bout with Ramirez Little Tornado had dropped his revolver, so that he now had nothing but his naked hands to depend upon.

There was no time to make nice points. What was to be done must be done on the instant and be effective. So Little Tornado dove with his head between the giant's legs, overturning him as if he had been struck by a battering-ram.

The fall broke his hold on Old Buncomb; and making everything else second to the rescue of his friend, our hero caught him by the shoulders, and by a skillful tug and wriggle, managed to get him on his back.

To run with him in this fashion to the gate, while his masterly retreat was covered by his friends, was a task much more easy to admire than to execute. But it was effective; and almost in a twinkling the besieged were again in security, with the gate shut between them and their foes.

In this neatly-managed sortie no lives were lost on either side, though some ugly wounds were borne away, as mementoes of as brisk a little scrimmage as border warfare can boast. Had the Indians been on foot, instead of mounted on horses rendered unmanageable by panic, the issue might not have been so happy.

During that breathless moment while all of their lives hung in the balance, Ruth had clung to Mrs. Fortescue, while following her son with agonized vision.

"See! see!" she cried, dragging the mother forward, while with one extended arm and forefinger she pointed out Little Tornado, as, bent under the burden of Old Buncomb's body, he dashed toward the gate. "Oh! is he not brave and strong? Is he not a hero? Sidney! Sidney! oh, how delighted I am!"

She was foremost in his thoughts. He had a purpose in view; but her glad cry told him that it was already accomplished. Still he kept on until he could drop his burden at her feet. Then in her love and admiration, and the relief of having him back safe and sound, forgetful of the eyes that might be upon her, she caught hold of him and hid her tearful face in his breast.

"There!" exclaimed our hero, in a tone of deep satisfaction. "When he comes round, he will at least know that his *boy* takes men's sizes in boots and bowie-knives. When he lost his head, it was his *boy* that had to save him from the consequence of his madness. And, little girl," he added, bending so as to bring his lips close to her ear, "I had you in mind. I've paid him off dollar for dollar for saving you; so we don't owe him anything on that score."

"Oh, don't speak to me like that, when no one knows what poor Maddie may be suffering. It seems wicked," whispered sensitive little Ruth, shrinking from her lover, because of the thrill of happiness which the love that vibrated in his voice sent through her, in spite of all of the pain and fear of the moment. "And remember, it was for her that he rushed into such awful peril."

Little Tornado flushed scarlet.

"And do you think," he cried, with a quiver of hurt sensibilities in his voice, "that I am less concerned than he at my sister's loss—"

"Oh, no, no!" Ruth hastened to interpose.

"Because," he kept on, "I know when a thing is impracticable? Is it more praiseworthy to rush to certain suicide, from which no possible good can come, than to wait for an opening in which something may be accomplished? Show me the chance to give my life for my sister's, if you doubt the strength of my love for her; but don't ask me to throw it away when I may yet—"

"Oh, bush, bush!" sobbed little Ruth. "Can't you see that I think you have both done nobly?"

"What a brute I am!" cried Little Tornado, in deep disgust. "My confounded temper is always making me ride over you rough-shod, as if you were a two-fisted plug-ugly like myself!"

"I know you never mean to hurt me," said the generous little Ruth; and their peace was made.

Meanwhile a rattling fire through the loopholes of the stockade had driven the assailants from the immediate vicinity to cover. Then there was a cessation of hostilities while the shades of evening gathered. They were evidently waiting for the darkness to begin their attack.

But that they were not spending the time in idleness was soon made apparent. As the night fell, flames shot up in every direction, and looking on with set teeth, flashing eyes, and hearts swelling with impotent rage, the settlers saw their homes and their crops—the first yield of the glen, and just ready for the sickle—given over to the fire-fiend.

But Madeline!

CHAPTER VI.

INDIAN JEALOUSY.

WILD ZEPH immediately got up.

Madeline lay half-stunned by her fall, and strangling with the excruciating pain in her throat; but the moment she felt herself released she struggled to her feet, her spirit not yet broken.

Wild Zeph stood in her path as before, with a look of alert defiance in her face, out of which the malignancy of hatred had passed, without being replaced by a smile. She hailed this contest as a rare diversion.

Madeline might have made one more desperate effort: but at that moment the Apaches swarmed through the pass, loading the air with their yells and the rattle of firearms.

The girl stood rigid, staring into vacancy, with her whole horrified soul centered in the one sense of hearing.

So passed a breathless moment. Then came the shock of the collision at the gate of the stockade.

She read the significance of this. Her friends were so hard beset that there was no hope of succor from them. Even if in the mad confusion of the moment they had yet missed her, who would dream of searching for her here? She remembered that the settlers had passed her before she entered the bridge-path. They would testify that she had gone on toward the stockade. It would be believed that she had gone to her home in her anxiety for the safety of her mother, and had so delayed until it was too late to get back to the stockade.

But was that her only chance? There was the prairie in the other direction; and the night was close at hand! If she could but escape this madwoman, she might make her way to a military post, some twenty miles to the northward!

She need not even traverse the distance on foot. There were horses picketed to grass on the plains to the eastward of the hills that shut in the glen. The Indians would have no knowledge of these, and she might skirt the hills to the north until she gained a point nearly opposite to where she now was, secure a mount, and by morning be safe at the post, besides sending assistance to her friends.

Stimulated by this hope of being of service to those she loved, her face brightened, and she glanced about in search of some weapon with which she might attack her detainer.

Standing coldly observant, Wild Zeph guessed that her prisoner meditated a renewal of the struggle. She followed the quick glances which found nothing that would serve as a weapon save the stones of the fireplace.

Advancing with the springy lightness of a panther, she put her foot on the one nearest Madeline, and smiled at her defiantly.

Convinced that she would be overmatched in a purely physical encounter, Madeline once more resorted to persuasion.

"Zeph," she said, "there may yet be time for me to escape. Why do you oppose me? What have I ever done to you, that you should wish to take so bitter a revenge upon me?"

"Done!" repeated the Indian girl, while her bosom swelled, her eyes blazed, and her nostrils dilated and quivered. "What have you not done?"

"Why, I have never harmed you or yours. I have always shown you kindness instead. Who has given you more or tried to teach you more than I?"

The half-breed laughed with bitter scorn.

"Ay!" she cried. "You would teach me out of your good book, as you call it, to love my enemies. Well, I hate mine!—hate them with a hot, fiery anger, compared with which the prairie fire is a cool wind from the north!—hate them as the cougar hates the dogs that have come to hunt it to death!"

"But I, Zeph!—I am not your enemy!"

"You!" pursued the half-breed, not heeding her interruption, but now shaking her fist at her, as she gave the rein to her passions, "you I hate so bitterly that your simple death would not be to me so much as a drop of water on the tongue of a man dying of thirst on the Staked Plain! How does he famish for water? He would drink it by the bucketful—by the barrelful! He would swim in it!—he would drown himself in it, so that he might get his fill! So do I ravin for my revenge on you, you accursed of an accursed race!—you traitor of the treacherous whites! Death! I will that you die a hundred deaths a day for a hundred moons, and that that be but a beginning!"

Stunned by this torrent of invective poured over her like a tide of burning lava, Madeline could only plead:

"But why?—in Heaven's name, why? What have I ever done to you but kindness?"

"Oh, you have been kind to me!" cried Zeph,

with a sneer so scathing that it seemed as if the words must hiss as they left her lips. "You have lulled me with sweet words, that you might under cover of them steal my heart out of my body and put a tarantula in its place!"

"But explain yourself. You cannot put your finger on a thing—"

"Why did you come to this country? Was there not enough for you in the miles and miles and miles of woodland and pastureland, of farmland and hunting-range, of mountain and prairie, that stretches so far toward the rising sun that the fleetest horse could not traverse it in many moons?"

"But how has my coming injured you?"

"Ask Colorado Steve."

In three words she told her secret; and the furious rush of passion so suddenly lapsed into a wail of anguish, as tears sprung to her eyes and her features writhed in pain, that Madeline stared at her for a moment open-mouthed.

Then a wave of love swept over her with such overwhelming force that her head swam round with vertigo, and she half-sunk, half-fell upon her knees.

"Listen to me, Zeph!—listen!" she pleaded.

"Oh, I am weary of listening to you," cried the half-breed, impatiently, waving her off.

"But you *must* hear me, for your own sake as well as for mine. I declare to you that I have never sought to wrong you in the way you think. Colorado Steve is nothing to me. I have never so much as spoke to him. Far from wishing to win him from you, I—I—love some one else!"

She knew the heart-logic of her own sex far too well to prove her innocence by urging that she despised and feared the half-breed's ruffianly lover; but so eager was she to put the possibility of her interference out of the question, that she made a confession with which, until now, even her own heart had been playing at hide and seek.

"You do not love—you do love! Bah! What is what you do, or do not do, to me?" cried Zeph, with passionate scorn. "Can you make Colorado Steve love me again, as he did before he saw you?"

"But you cannot blame me for what is not my fault."

"That is more of your white reasoning—of a piece with loving your enemies! Ha! ha! But tell me, if you spill my drink in the sand, am I less thirsty because it was done by accident?"

"Zeph! Zeph! it is wicked to bear malice in this way!" cried poor Madeline, despairing of correcting the perverted views of the half-breed before the catastrophe which menaced her had fallen. "Listen to me! I promise to go away from this country, and never return where Colorado Steve can see me. I will—"

"When it is too late! You should never have come here! Now your only use is to serve my revenge!"

"I will not be sacrificed to your blind malignity!" cried Madeline, enraged at the bitter wrong of having her young life given to appease the savage instincts of this creature, who seemed to her little better than a wild beast.

And in that last madness of the struggle for self-preservation which extinguishes all gentler sentiments and brings out the animal in us every one, she sprung forward and made a clutch at the knife which yet lay where Zeph had dropped it.

But the half-breed put her foot upon it and once more grappled with her prisoner.

The struggle was now more stubbornly prolonged; but in the end the woman who had passed all of her life out of doors conquered the woman who had passed hers within. Madeline lay panting and exhausted, with closed eyes and relaxed muscles, while her adversary stood over her, somewhat blown, but with no abatement of her implacable resolve.

And through it all the hag never moved!

At this moment long-expected footsteps were heard approaching.

Madeline, galvanized with terror, opened her eyes with a piercing shriek, and seeking flight while she scrambled to her feet, half ran, half crept to the furthest corner of the hut.

"They are coming! they are coming!" she cried, wringing her hands, and sobbing and moaning, as she shrunk close to the wall. "Oh, we are lost! I shall never see my dear mother again—never! never!"

And sinking upon her knees, she covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out the horrible sight that must presently appear at the doorway.

Wild Zeph picked up the knife with which she had menaced Madeline, and stepped a little way back from the door, yet near enough to intercept her prisoner, did she try to escape. There she folded her arms, still with the weapon held in readiness for instant use if required, and waited, as coldly indifferent apparently to her own share in the danger as the hag who still preserved her strange abstraction unbroken.

Then the doorway was obstructed by the figure of a man who stopped on the threshold, and resting his hands on either jamb, thrust his head into the room to peer round.

The sun having sunk below the horizon, the brief twilight of the prairie was rapidly deepening, so that objects in the hut could be but indistinctly seen from the doorway, while any one standing in the position taken by the newcomer could be seen clearly enough in outline, but the expression of his face would be obscured.

"Well, I'll be eternally hornswaggled!" ejaculated the intruder. "Ef we hain't got 'em in hyer as snug as gophers!"

At the sound of that voice both of the girls started, but with vastly different emotions.

"Steve!" flashed through the brain of the half-breed, seeming to set her on fire; and instantly every muscle was braced for desperate action.

Abandoning herself to a despair the depths of which only such violent and moody natures know, she had resolved to yield herself up to the Apaches, for the sake of seeing the woman she hated suffer the untold agonies of Indian captivity.

She had every reason to believe that her mother would be murdered out of hand, as only a useless incumbrance; but such filial affection

as she may have had she sacrificed to her revenge.

For herself and Madeline she did not expect death. Indeed, it would have frustrated her purpose to let her victim off so cheaply as that. She wanted to see her live through the nameless horrors a white woman has to endure in the wigwam of an Indian warrior. Only this, a daily feast to a greedy hate, would requite the loss of her lover. To witness it she was willing to share it, as far as her blunter nature could be made to feel that most degraded of slaveries.

And now the appearance of Colorado Steve was a surprise to her. She had not thought of him as a leader of the savages. Even now she did not associate him with them. For one ecstatic moment she dreamed that he had come to rescue her; and as a flash of lightning illuminates a landscape, she saw herself re-established in his affections and taken into his hut as his squaw—to drudge for him like a soulless beast of burden, to receive without complaint his kicks and cuffs and curses, but to have him for her own!

For this prospect she was ready to bow her neck for him to place his foot upon it. She only waited for the word which should confirm her hope that he had indeed come to save her.

Unfamiliar with Steve's voice, having heard it but two or three times before, Madeline only realized that one of her own race was at hand. It did not occur to her that he might be a white renegade, leading the bloodthirsty savages against his own people.

"Oh, save me—save me!" she cried, springing forward.

"Save ye, my pretty one? Oh, I'll save ye!" responded Colorado Steve with a brutal laugh. "Maybe ye wouldn't believe it, but I ain't come fur nothin' else."

To the passion-distraught creature, whose soul was shaken between a delirious hope and maddening jealousy, this was like the dropping of a spark into a powder-magazine. All her fancy's paradise was annihilated as the landscape is blotted out in darkness when the fiery bolt has sped.

With a snarling shriek of concentrated fury, such as a maniac might utter when leaping to rend an imagined foe, she sprang forward, and seizing Madeline by her flying hair as she sought to speed by her, she wrenched her back with such violence that she was hurled to the floor, to lie half-stunned and wholly helpless.

Pinning her down by her hair, upon which she planted her knee, she held the knife suspended over her bosom.

"One step across that threshold!" she cried to Colorado Steve, "and she dies!"

The Indian bag lay still without motion, though she knew perfectly well, so far at least as her ears could tell her, the tragic scene that was being enacted within ten feet of where she lay.

"*Santo Dios!* it is the devil incarnate! Senor Estevan, I wish you joy of them—those two!"

Senor Ramirez had made his appearance behind Colorado Steve, and stood looking

under one of his arms, while at his back were several Apaches, stony spectators of the scene.

Without changing his position, Colorado Steve twisted his head so as to look over his shoulder, and burst into a gruff:

"Haw! haw! haw! Ain't they beauties—both on 'em? Whar's the gilt-edge galoot in this hyar section o' country what kin sport sich a menagerie as that?"

"As for me," declared Senor Ramirez, "I would as soon house with a rattlesnake and a wildcat!"

"Oh, you!" scoffed Colorado Steve, with withering disdain. "Keep to yer own kind. Skunks an' Greasers never have a fallin' out."

"*Maldita!*" hissed the Spaniard, under his breath, scowling at Colorado Steve's back as he would not have dared to scowl to his face.

Then he went on aloud:

"Your wildcat will spoil your rattlesnake, if you do not soon interfere."

"Oh, no!" said Colorado Steve, confidently

"It would be a great pity that you should lose one of them—you who are so fond of that sort of animals, but for my part, to be frank, it would not break my heart. I owe the rattlesnake no good will."

"Arter the way she scotched ye? You're cowardly bound enough to harbor a grudge ag'in' a woman, nobody'll question. But ef it was me, I wouln't give it away."

Once more Senor Ramirez had recourse to the luxury of profanity which did Colorado Steve no harm, and was something of a relief to him.

"Hallo, thar, Injun! Old Lantern-jaws!"

Thus in a brilliantly funny moment had the usually slow-witted Steve styled the Apache chief, on account of his spareness of flesh; and the barbarian thought it a name of distinction!

"Ugh!" he ejaculated.

"What do you do with a squaw what cuts up high-jinks in that thar kind of style?"

"Stick!" was the terse recommendation of the unsentimental Mr. Lo.

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed Steve, staring at Wild Zeph, and trying to imagine how she would receive such discipline.

All this time she had stared at him, trying to make out his intimate association with the Apaches. Now with a fierce sense of scorn for his treachery, she realized the truth.

"Come!" she cried. "Declare yourself. What are you here for?"

"Look a-byer, Zeph," he said, moved to sullen displeasure by the cavalier tone she had used to him, "drop that thar knife!"

"Why should I drop it?" she demanded, wishing to draw him out.

"Becuz I don't propose to hev my property spoiled by none o' your dog-gone nonsense!"

"Your property?"

"Waal, what's the matter with that?"

"How is she your property?"

"That's none o' your infernal business! Drop it, I say!"

"I will make it my business!"

"Waal, dang my skin!" shouted Steve, open-mouthed at this defiance of his will.

"Do you love her?" asked Wild Zeph, choking as she forced herself to ask the question.

"She suits me, an' that's a-gittin' down to bottom facts!" was Colorado Steve's way of declaring his preference.

"Before I get through with her, I will fix her so that she won't suit you quite so well!" cried Wild Zeph, again boiling with rage, at this flouting in her face of his disloyalty to herself.

"If you touch her, you hellion—"

But having crossed the threshold with one heavy foot, as if about to spring upon her and wrest the knife from her hand, he was brought up with a round turn.

"Stop! One step further, and I bury it to the hilt in her body."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SENOR'S LITTLE DODGE.

So fiercely was this threat launched at him, that he was fain to take his unwelcome person out of the door—not, however, without an oath, savage, if impotent.

"Bring torches hyar!" he commanded.

It was getting so dark that he could scarcely make out the respective figures in the hut. Although she seemed to command the situation as it was, he dreaded to give Zeph a chance to carry out her threat without his seeing, so as to at least make a desperate effort to frustrate her.

On her side, the half-breed hesitated, casting about in her mind for some means of securing the girl alive, and subjecting her to the tortures she had meditated.

"Death!" she reflected. "No! no! she shall not escape me so. She shall live! I must see her watering the ground with her tears, as she lies on her face, praying to her God to give her the boon of death! But how to hold her alive, yet keep her out of his clutches—that is the question."

Meanwhile Senor Ramirez had withdrawn beyond Wild Zeph's range of vision through the door, ostensibly to oversee the procurement of the torches Colorado Steve had demanded, but really for the purpose of that treachery which was so congenial to his nature.

He now touched Steve's hand, and having drawn his attention, beckoned him away from the door.

Steve was reluctant to leave his post, but the Spaniard was so earnest in his pantomime that he at last complied.

"What do ye want?" he demanded, with a frown, yet guardedly, as evidently comported with Ramirez's wish for secrecy. "Some o' yer underhanded work, I'll go bail!"

"You are a good shot," began the Spaniard, ignoring his surly manner.

"Yas; but white men don't shoot women, like as if they was Greasers!"

"Have I asked you to shoot anybody?" asked Ramirez, with some pardonable resentment of his wanton insults.

"Come!" cried Colorado Steve, roughly, "I don't want no back talk out o' you, ye onderstand. Ef you've got anythin' to say, spit 'er out, an' be hanged to ye!—fur I don't propose to stand hyar all night a-chinnin' about it."

Ramirez came to the point at once.

"Let me go to the door with a torch, pretending to argue the matter with her in your be-

half. You then stand far enough back so that she cannot see you in the dark, with the torch in her eyes, and shoot the knife out of her hand."

"Waal, I'll be eternally hornswaggled!" cried Steve, lost in admiration of this scheme which was so far beyond his capacity for invention. "I've always said—an' now, by gee! I'll sw'ar it's so!—that when the devil wants a new suit o' clo's, he always comes to you for the pattern!"

Ramirez showed his teeth in a pleased smile at this compliment to his fiendish talent.

A torch being ignited, the Spaniard caused one of the Indians to hold it directly in the doorway above his head.

Wild Zeph watched this proceeding suspiciously. She believed that it was a device to outwit her, but as there was no access to the hut save through the door, she thought that she had only to be on her guard against Ramirez's eloquence.

"Senorita," he began in his oiliest tones, doffing his sombrero to do her honor, "it is the wish of my friend and your most devoted adorer that I explain to you the true relation between him and the Senorita Magdalena, which is quite different from what you seem to think."

"Gads!" muttered Colorado Steve, enthusiastically, from his post in the rear. "Don't it take that tallow-bided coyote, though, to come the honeyfugle dodge! He'd lie the claws off a grizzly b'ar!"

He was skulking in the shadows, with his carbine in readiness, watching for a chance to fire at the weapon which Wild Zeph held in suspense. Between him and the door were several savages who must have sufficient confidence in his aim to permit him to fire between their bodies.

Madeline lay perfectly still, with her eyes fixed as by fascination on the keen point of the knife, awaiting the issue. She could not release her head, and dared not move lest she should precipitate her fate.

"Look here, Ramirez," said Wild Zeph, contemptuously, "if Colorado Steve has anything to say to me, why don't he say it himself?"

"Ah! but consider, senorita," urged the Spaniard, "the sight of your lover pleading for another woman! Is it not enough to close your ears against anything he might say? But when his friend, on the honor of a gentleman, assures you that his intentions toward the lady in no way conflict with his loyalty to you; when it is sworn to you that he is moved by revenge upon those who have heaped insult upon him, and that through her—"

Crack!

A thrill of excruciating pain shot up Wild Zeph's arm, and it fell numb and helpless to her side, the knife having been dashed out of it by an unseen missile.

With a laugh of triumph, Senor Ramirez clapped his sombrero on his head, and leaped through the doorway, followed by several of the savages.

Wild Zeph saw at once that she had been tricked. Her rage was satanic. If she must lose her victim, let her at least mar forever the beauty in which lay her power. With the

hand she could still use she made a dive at Madeline's face, intending to rend the delicate flesh with her nails, or perchance gouge out an eye!

But seeing the knife disappear from before her eyes, and divining the next resort of the vixen, Madeline covered her face with her hands, though she could not move further.

The next instant Senor Ramirez had torn Wild Zeph from the body of her victim, and held her, in spite of her frantic struggles—he was valiant enough with women!—with her hands behind her back.

The moment her hair was released, Madeline writhed over upon her face, gathered her knees under her, and scrambled to her feet.

Goaded by the frantic instinct to escape the clutches of those fierce-looking savages, she leaped over the body of the Indian hag, so as to get between it and the wall, and falling upon her knees, clasped the wrinkled old neck in her fresh young arms, feeling that age must be some little protection.

The Indians who were not assisting Senor Ramirez looked at her stolidly, certainly not understanding her motive for hugging the hag, who lay as unresponsive as if she were some time-blackened wooden idol.

Colorado Steve entered the hut grinning from ear to ear.

"Waal, ma'am," he said to Madeline, not troubling himself to look at Wild Zeph, "I allow as how we got ye out of a dog-gone nasty hole in purty good shape. That thar critter is as wicked as sin when she's on full feed. But, Lor', ma'am! ye needn't take on about her no longer. I own her, I do; an' ef I say 'Drop it!' why, she's got to drop it, ur she gits the buck-skin! An' jest take things easy, ma'am, all round. Ye kin, jest as well as not. These hyar Injuns, I'll allow, ain't sweet-smellin'—specially in fly-time—but I'm cock o' the walk hyar, ye onderstand; so ye needn't be afeard o' them. But it turns my stummick to see ye a-slobberin' over that thar ole blacksmith's apron, I sw'ar it does! Thar hain't no sort o' call fur it; an' ye can't git no more fur yer money a-pawin' over her than ef she war a ship's figger-head."

Madeline gazed earnestly at the speaker. Was there a hope that his purpose might not be so cruel as she had feared? He seemed to be a good-natured brute. She recalled that in the encounter before the tavern he had acted as if he considered the thing a joke rather than a serious fight.

"Oh, sir! tell me," she exclaimed, "why are you with those terrible Indians? You cannot be so wicked as to lead them against people who have never harmed you, and of your own race, too!"

"Well, ma'am," said Colorado Steve, with a confidential air, while he twirled his hat on one finger, "ye see, it's all along o' this dirty Greaser, hyar, the which he's my pard, an' o' course I have to stand by him, allowin' as it's might low-lived work fur a white man an' a Christian! But you're bekownst to the fact that t'other day he was soused in the horse-trough, the which it sarved him jest right. Dog me ef I wouldn't 'a' held his head under, ef it had 'a' been my deal! But when you make a

mop of a man, right or wrong, it's natteral that he should stand to git squar'. So the senor, hyar, he says—'Drop on 'em with a batch of Injuns,' an' hyar we be. The which the senor, he hain't got nothin' to do with you, ma'am, an' ye needn't take no account o' him whatsome-dever."

All this was said with such apparent honesty that Madeline's hopes began to revive.

"Then you do not mean to injure me?" she asked, rising and standing with her hands clasped over her bosom.

"Me?" cried Colorado Steve, grinning as if the idea was so preposterous as to be amusing. "Well, now, bless yer leetle heart an' soul!—I wouldn't hurt a hair o' yer party head fur—Haw! haw! haw! That thar is good—that is! Me hurt ye!"

And Colorado Steve twirled his hat and ogled her with the mixed admiration and bashfulness of a country gawky in love.

There was no questioning that Wild Zeph had very good grounds for her jealousy, as far as her recreant lover was concerned; but this was not particularly distasteful to Madeline, if it took the innocent form of devotion at a distance.

"Then you will return me to my friends?" she asked, in painful suspense.

"Waal, ma'am, ye see it wouldn't be quite safe, not jest now at the present time, when the Injuns is on the p'int o' cleanin' out the stockade. An' not wishin' ye to come to harm—"

"Oh! I am willing to share the fate of my friends!" cried Madeline.

"Ye shall look over the ground, ma'am, an' then I reckon you'll change yer mind. Ye see, when these red devils gits started, thar's no tellin' whar they'll fetch up; an' they've come pledged to clean out the glen, root an' branch."

"But you have influence with them. Cannot you prevent this terrible work?"

"Waal, ma'am, ye see, it's mostly the say o' the senor; which the same it was him as got soused in the horse-trough, to the truth o' which you're bekownst yerself."

"Yes! yes! but you yourself just said that it was no more than he deserved! Must innocent women and children suffer to gratify his brutal revenge?"

Colorado Steve scratched his head reflectively, as if this were a nice point to be considered.

"M—m waal," he said, presently, "the senor, bein' although he's a Greaser, an' Greasers is all alike, an' powerful bad medicine—yet he's got feelin's like the rest o' us—the which you must allow yer-ef; an' it's mighty r'ilin' fur to git a horse-trough swabbed out with yer. It must be mighty r'ilin'!" he added, shaking his head, as he measured the natural effect on one's feelings.

Seeing that it was useless to try to reason with such an animal as this, Madeline had recourse to a woman's weapon before which most men are only too ready to "give up the ship." She fell upon her knees before him, and with tears streaming from her beautiful eyes, besought him to take the side of humanity.

Steve shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and twirled his hat in great seeming embarrassment at her distress; but he got no further than that "it was the senor's funeral, the

which he, Steve, wasn't supposed to be a-runnin' of it."

Senor Ramirez stood by with glittering eyes, waiting for Madeline to appeal to him; but knowing that his devilish nature could not be moved, she did not give him the satisfaction of refusing her in his polished way.

Finding all hopeless, she yielded herself to Colorado Steve's direction, and they prepared to leave the hut.

Then came the question as to what disposal was to be made of the hag, who yet lay as she had since Madeline's entrance. She had had a quarrel with her daughter that morning, and this was a case of sulks, not different in kind, but in degree, from what we sometimes see in people who call themselves civilized.

Since she had been overpowered and pinioned, Wild Zeph had stood in stony silence, only the baleful glitter of her eyes showing the hurricane of passion that raged beneath the surface. She fixed her eyes upon Colorado Steve, as passing through the doorway with Madeline at his side, he turned at Senor Ramirez's question, and cast a careless glance at her mother.

"It's your game. Pitch the trump to suit yourself," he answered indifferently.

"*Caramba!* what have I to do with old hags?" muttered Ramirez.

And turning to the silent Apache chief, he said:

"My beathen friend, I have no doubt that you will know what to do with one of your own people better than I should."

"Ugh! No good!" was the Apache's summary disposal of the matter.

And reaching the side of the old squaw with two strides, he coolly drew his tomahawk and sunk it to the eye in her skull!

A quiver ran through Wild Zeph's frame, as she stood and saw this ruthless butchery, but she uttered no sound, nor did she make the slightest move to prevent it.

Senor Ramirez shrugged his shoulders, and motioned her to precede him through the door.

Already outside, Madeline was spared this horrible sight.

She found that the night sky was illuminated with a lurid glare. As they traversed the pass and reached the glen, she saw how the ruthless hand of the destroyer had laid waste all the fair fields on which the sun had set. The grain that had waved in the evening wind was now being licked up by running tongues of fire. The houses they had built, driving with every nail a hope for the loved ones to be sheltered by them, were wrapped in flames.

At thought of the happiness destroyed by that night's wretched work Madeline could not restrain her tears.

She was placed under a guard of Indians where she could see the preparations to assail the stockade. This now stood alone untouched in the midst of desolation.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BOLD VENTURE.

WHEN Old Buncomb recovered consciousness, the first face his eyes opened upon was Ruth's.

She was on her knees beside him, bathing his face with water, and weeping bitterly all the time.

"What is the matter with me? What has happened?" he asked, in bewilderment.

"Oh! don't you know?—the terrible fight with the Indians at the gate of the stockade?"

He lifted himself on his elbow and stared around.

Women were running hither and thither, huddling their frightened children together like hens brooding their chickens at the sight of a hawk. Others sat weeping and wringing their hands over the loss of their worldly all. One poor creature was inconsolable. Her boy had been out to drive the cows home when the alarm came, and had not reached the stockade. She was hanging about Mrs. Fortescue's neck; and the two were sharing their bereavement.

Men were rushing about, distributing ammunition to others who were firing through the loopholes of the inclosure.

On all sides was the wildest excitement and disorder.

Even while he collected his scattered wits the firing ceased. The Indians had got to cover.

"Yes, yes! I recall it all now," he said, putting his hand to his head. "But how did I get back into the stockade? I remember nothing since I was cutting my way through the savages to get—to get—"

He stopped, at a loss, and Ruth answered his question.

"It was Sidney that brought you in. Oh! you should have seen how he fought to reach you! And then, after you were struck down, he got you on his back, and ran through the gate with you. Oh! it was beautiful, but so terrible!"

"Yes—yes," said Old Buncomb, vaguely, as if still in search of a lost link in the chain of recollection. "But what was I trying to get? It seems—"

With a sob in her voice Ruth told him, in a whisper:

"It was Maddie! Oh! what has become of her?"

With a sharp ejaculation Old Buncomb leaped to his feet.

"Madeline!"

Then he stood trembling and looking about.

"Where is Little Tornado?"

Without stopping for an answer, he set out in search of him.

Little Tornado was in the thick of the fight, you may believe. He was always where the music was loudest.

"Come! We have not a moment to lose!" said Old Buncomb, seizing him by the shoulder where he found him in a group of men twice his age.

"What's to be done?" asked our hero, promptly.

"You must ride to the post for help."

"I was just arguing that point with the commandant. I am glad that you have come to back me."

"But, Bunker," said Mr. Thurston, "we cannot expose the boy to such risks, with his inexperience and rashness. If it must be done—though I am free to confess that I do not see how any one is to get out of the stockade, sur—"

rounded as it is, without detection and death—let some one older make the attempt."

"I'll show you how it is to be done," cried Little Tornado, with that sanguine confidence in himself which the commandant had just been deprecating.

"He will do better than any man you have," said Old Buncomb, quietly. "Let him go. I will answer for his skill and prudence, so far as one can be prudent in so desperate a case as this. One must take great chances when death waits on failure."

"But his mother!" said the commandant, lowering his voice. "Remember that she is mourning one child now. We cannot ask her to give her last to almost certain death, even to save the rest of us."

"He remember! As if every nerve in his body were not thrilling with anguish over the same loss!"

"It is not death that menaces her," he said, his voice steady and cold. "In bringing help to the glen, her brother will be bringing her the best chance of escape. It is because I believe that he will be more certain of success than any one else, that I wish him to be the one to try."

"I'll go!" said Little Tornado, decidedly.

"Then God go with you!" said Mr. Thurston, fervently, putting his hand on his shoulder with paternal tenderness. "But be careful—be very careful."

"You may depend upon me, sir," said Little Tornado, respectfully. "Of course I know that I may be carrying the safety of all here with me."

And he thought of Ruth as he spoke. No danger of his not taking every precaution where her safety was at stake.

"Come with me," said Old Buncomb, moving off without further loss of time.

He led the way toward an out-house which stood within the inclosure of palisades. It was used as an ammunition and storehouse.

"We must reduce the risk to a minimum," he said. "There are but two white men who can be known as such and live outside of this stockade to-night."

"Well!" repeated Little Tornado. "Are you going, too? What is the need? I can manage—"

"I am going out, but not to interfere with you," interrupted Old Buncomb.

"But what else—What for?"

"Can't you guess?"

He turned his clouded face toward the boy.

Sidney looked into his eyes a moment in silence; then he replied:

"I think I can guess."

"Well, then, there is no need of saying anything more about it."

"Bunker!"

Little Tornado extended his hand.

Old Buncomb clasped it in silence.

"God bless you, old man, and give you success!"

His voice shook. Old Buncomb knew that another heart was aching as painfully as his own over the unknown fate of Madeline Fortescue.

"You lugged me back into the stockade, Sid."

"Ruth told you?"

"Yes. It was a mad, a foolish thing for me to do—to risk everything where there was no chance but to lose."

"I tried to do what a boy could to fetch things out right," said Sidney, a little maliciously.

"We changed places there, for a fact," admitted Old Buncomb. "But you may depend upon me now, as I have learned to depend upon you."

"That makes us square!" said Little Tornado, extending his hand.

And so they entered the out-house.

From a box, which was his own private property, Old Buncomb took the whole outfit of an Indian, in the way of clothes, from the feathered head-dress to the moccasins.

"They are rather large for you," he said; "but an Indian's garments are seldom cut very close to scale. I guess you can make them pass in the dark."

"They're beauties!" cried Little Tornado, in delight. "My own mother wouldn't know me in 'em, with a little burnt umber on my face and hands."

"We have that, too," said Old Buncomb, taking the pigment out of a small box.

"Why! how do you come by all of these things?" cried Little Tornado, looking at his companion curiously. "Have you ever been on the stage?"

"They are very convenient to have in this country, aren't they?" asked Old Buncomb, evading the last question, perhaps unintentionally.

"Yes—certainly."

"I thought they might be, sometime. Now, as you're not used to this sort of thing, perhaps you will let me put you in trim."

"But where is your rig?"

"I will get one when the time comes."

And Old Buncomb set to work to transform Little Tornado into an Indian brave.

To guard against every possible accident, instead of confining his work to face, neck, hands, arms and thighs, which are the ordinarily exposed parts of an Indian's body—Old Buncomb insisted on staining Little Tornado's skin a fine butternut brown, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. He further dyed his hair coal-black. Then, when he had arranged his dress and given him his weapons, the effect was perfect. Leaving out of account the cast of features, no one could have told that it was a disguised white.

"What will Ruth say?" cried Little Tornado, surveying himself ruefully. "She will never acknowledge such a hemlock-tanned Yankee as this!"

"Suppose you go and find out whether that is so?" said Old Buncomb. "I will be ready presently."

Little Tornado acted on this suggestion.

At sight of him a woman screamed and fainted. Others were set to trembling, and had to hear him speak before they were fully persuaded that it was one of their own people, and not a savage who had somehow gained admit-

tance to the stockade. The children cried and shrunk away, even when he spoke to them, and their parents assured them that it was all right.

His mother ran to him all atremble.

"Ob, Sidney!" she cried, putting her arms about him and weeping on his breast. "I can't let you go! Indeed, my son, this is too much! Was there no one else, that they must rob me of both of my children?"

He consoled her, himself much moved by her love for him. Then he persuaded her to go into the house and lie down where she would be quiet and give her nerves a chance to recover their tone.

Ruth looked at him through tears, and trembled even while she clung to him, as he put his arms about her neck and kissed her.

She charged him over and over again to be careful, for her sake, and told him how her heart stood still at the thought of the danger he was going into, at the same time that it beat exultantly that Old Buncomb, whose words had been repeated all through the stockade, had said that he was the best qualified to go on such an errand.

He got full measure of the soldier's meed—the homage of woman.

Then Old Buncomb made his appearance.

Every one was astonished to see a stranger, with a smooth face, black hair, and a complexion dark as an Indian's, come, as if he had dropped from the cloud, into their midst.

"By Jove!" cried Little Tornado, his eyes sparkling with admiration. "I never dreamed that you was such a dandy for good looks! And so young, too! What the deuce have you meant, anyway, by making yourself look like an old codger all this time? But it wasn't necessary to sacrifice all of that magnificent suit of whiskers—I mean to bring out your real self. Lopping a little of the tangle-brush would have done it. But where's your dress?"

"It is out yonder," replied Old Buncomb, coolly. "A friend of mine is keeping it for me until I call for it."

"And do you mean to say that you have given me the only dress you had, and are about to get one off a savage's back after you have got outside of the stockade?"

"You might perhaps reasonably infer as much," said the scout, quietly.

"Look here, Bunky! You've got to take this dress yourself."

"You seem to have a very poor opinion of my steadfastness of purpose," said Old Buncomb. "When I put that on you, don't you think I meant it to stay?"

"But you have no right to surprise me—no, cheat me—into the acceptance of such a sacrifice."

Old Buncomb bent toward him, and said into his ear, in a low voice which no one else could hear:

"I gave it to your sister's brother."

Little Tornado looked at him, and then silently extended his hand.

"If—if," said Old Buncomb, unsteadily, "she is saved through your efforts, and I—I—fail—"

He stopped a moment; and his auditor knew

that he was thinking that, if he failed, he would not be alive to tell her himself. Then he concluded:

"Tell her that I did it—will you?"

"Indeed I will, old fellow!" cried Little Tornado, wringing his hand. "But there will be no need of my telling her, unless because of your modesty."

And he smiled his confidence in his friend.

Old Buncomb turned away without reply, to meet Mr. Thurston, who cried:

"But what is this that they tell me? You are not going too? Indeed, Bunker, we can't spare you! What is the stockade going to do, without men to defend it? They may attack us at any moment after dark."

"Undoubtedly; but you cannot think that I have overlooked that obvious fact."

"But why will not one do to make the attempt to get to the post? Wait until we have some proof that he has failed—which God forbid!"

"I shall not accompany Sidney," said Old Buncomb.

"But what then—"

"I have hopes of being able to bring her daughter back to the poor woman who is sorrowing in yonder. And you do not forget that she is my pardner's sister. If I send him away, I owe it to him to take the place he would otherwise occupy, in attempting to effect her rescue."

There was no use in trying to argue with this quiet, decided man.

"Do as you think best," said the commandant.

"I have every confidence in your judgment and interest in the welfare of these defenseless people."

Then they waited for the darkness to cover their movements; and it was during this time that Madeline was having her experience with Colorado Steve.

The gate of the stockade was toward the center of the glen, and was therefore illuminated by the conflagration which was desolating the fields and homes of the besieged settlers; but directly opposite, so that it was thrown by contrast into denser shadow, was a neatly-constructed sally-port in the wall of the stockade. It was designed to meet that last, desperate contingency, when a garrison is forced by starvation, or for other cause, to abandon its defenses in the depths of the night and trust to escape through the enemy's lines and flight across the open country. That it might be available for this purpose, it must be kept secret; and so secretly had it been constructed, and so perfect was its adjustment to the other parts of the wall, that less than a dozen men in the glen knew of its existence. These were the commandant and a few of the most reliable men of the settlement.

Through this sally-port Old Buncomb and Little Tornado made their exit so quietly that few in the stockade knew when they went.

Old Buncomb went first. It was full fifteen minutes later that Little Tornado followed him. He knew every inch of the ground, so that he had no difficulty in making his way down the slope of the slight eminence on which the palisade stood,

into a densely-wooded glen which wound through the hills to the plain beyond.

He neither saw nor heard anything of Old Buncomb; but he soon found that the Indians were moving about so promiscuously that he judged it safer to proceed boldly, trusting to the perfectness of his disguise, than to be caught skulking.

But he had hardly proceeded twenty rods, when what he had observed among the others failed in his case. They had passed and repassed without speaking to one another; but as he was hurrying by a group upon which he came, one of them called to him, saying something in Apache, which was as unintelligible to him as if he had been addressed in Hebrew.

Now came the test of his metal!

He walked straight up to them; and there were not less than a dozen or fifteen in the party!

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

OLD BUNKER'S first need was an Indian outfit and, making the same discovery that Little Tornado did a few minutes later, he soon saw that he could not proceed far undetected without one.

But the very fact that the savages were so many and so disconnected gave him his opportunity. He could drop one, and the rest would never miss him—unless they chanced upon his dead body. Then there would be a counting of noses!

As they moved about without caution, supposing that they had nothing to fear, he had no difficulty in knowing when any one was in his vicinity. He therefore easily selected his victim.

The doomed wretch, with his arms full of brush, passed by a tree behind which he had taken his position. He stepped out behind him. There was a quick blow. The fagot-carrier fell to the ground, as if he had tripped over a root. Another body went down with his. A moment later he was borne into the hollow trunk of the tree which had secreted his slayer.

Two or three minutes passed. An Indian to all appearances, so like the fagot-carrier that he could not have been distinguished unless he exposed his face to a broad glare of light, issued from the tree, picked up the brush, and passed on in the direction the other had been going.

As he neared the point to which others were bearing like burdens, he was soon surrounded on all sides by them. He was addressed, and made answer in the Apache dialect, his guttural tones differing in nothing from those of his interlocutors. Then he roamed at will, soon discovering where Madeline was seated under guard, with Wild Zeph near her.

Zeph's hands were still bound; but Madeline was free from any restraint save her guards.

Old Buncomb knew that he could do nothing for her with so many about her. Two, or even three, he might have managed in a desperate strait; but with extraordinary caution, Colorado Steve had placed half a dozen on duty. It was not that he feared for Madeline so much, but that he knew that Wild Zeph was equal to almost anything.

But Old Buncomb had seen the woman whose

safety was the only boon he asked of Heaven. She sat watching in dry-eyed misery the fiend's work that was going on about her; but her quiet manner told him that no serious injury had come to her yet. She was safe—she was well; restore her to liberty and security, and twenty-four hours of rest would make her her old, bright, beautiful self again!

With this music singing in his heart he went to prepare the way for her rescue.

He first found that her horse, still saddled, was tied near those ridden by Colorado Steve and Senor Ramirez. Having seen them before, he easily recognized them among the mustangs used by the Apaches. The presence of Madeline's horse here indicated that Steve meant to mount her upon it when he took his departure from the desolated glen.

"But she must have a better mount than a horse that has stood what he has gone through to-day," said Old Buncomb to himself. "When the time comes, we must be able to show them a clean pair of heels. Lucky for me that they did not think it worth while to put these animals under guard, or I should have been puzzled to make the exchange."

His next care was Little Tornado. He had assigned the time of his making his venture, so as to give himself opportunity to procure and get into his Indian rig, in order that he might lend the boy assistance if he got into trouble.

Going round opposite the sallyport, he waited for him to make his appearance. He did not join him, since it was his purpose to leave him to his own devices as much as possible.

"The boy is a born scout!" he exclaimed, when he saw him throw off his caution for the bolder demeanor which was really safer. "He has the readiness of resource in emergency—the quickness to grasp a situation, and the boldness to act vigorously."

He was charmed to see the firmness with which Little Tornado walked up to the group of savages, one of whom had called to him. But as the boy did not understand the Indian dialect, he was afraid to leave him unassisted to the chances of the ticklish position in which he found himself.

Little Tornado saw that they had felled a large tree and were about to lift it. He guessed that they had summoned him to help; and if that was so, probably no particular reply would be required, provided he bore a hand. He therefore resolved to make such shifts as he could with sullen grunts. If he was spoken to more particularly, and awakened their suspicions, he would have to run for it, trusting to his lightness of heel and the friendly darkness. If, on the other hand, he could scrape through without betraying the fact that there was any one from the stockade outside, he was willing to take great risks; for to disclose this fact would put the savages on their guard, and therefore make his friend's task not only more difficult, but also more hazardous.

But at the critical moment a shadowy figure appeared beside him. His hand was grasped and pressed thrice in quick succession, as if to convey a signal. He heard two words that had a very pleasant sound just then. They were;

"All right!"

Then the speaker kept directly on in Apache; and he knew that it was Old Buncomb.

By the clever device of answering as if he thought it was he that had been addressed, Old Buncomb covered Little Tornado's silence. Then side by side they lifted on the tree-trunk which was to be used as a battering-ram.

Having carried it to its destination, they were again free and went off together.

"That was a tight squeak!" laughed Little Tornado.

"Hush!" cautioned Old Buncomb. "We can talk about that some other time."

Then, as they went, he occasionally made some observation in Apache, and answered himself in a different pitch of voice, so that if they passed any one near enough to be overheard, it sounded as if they were conversing in the Indian dialect.

Getting clear of the savages, they made their way to the horses which were tethered to graze on the plains beyond the hills to the eastward. It was fortunate for their present needs that the gien had been alarmed just before boys had been sent to fetch the animals in.

"This is the fellow that is to take me twenty miles in sixty minutes!" said Little Tornado, selecting one of the animals.

"No," said Old Buncomb. "Your sister is to ride that horse to-night. He may be called upon to take her five miles inside of ten minutes before daylight."

"You are about as modest in your requirements as I am," said Little Tornado. "But I hope that he may make it if called upon."

"You will take Fidler's mare and the roan that Danforth was hoping to pit against her this fall," said Old Buncomb. "By riding them alternately, and using the one that is running free to stimulate the one that is carrying you, you can get their best speed out of them."

"Tell me one thing," said Little Tornado, as he leaped upon the back of one of the animals, and took the other by the leading-line, "have you seen Madeline?"

"Yes."

"And she is—"

"Well."

"Thank God for that! Good night, old fellow!"

He rode straight out from the hill to the eastward at a walk, but when he had got beyond earshot he turned northward; and then any one who had seen the pace he urged those horses to by keeping the led one half a neck in advance of the one that carried his weight, would have thought that a famous handicap.

Meanwhile Old Buncomb drew the tethering-pin of another horse, and led that and the one he had selected for Madeline round to where he was to make the exchange.

Having effected this without detection, he joined Madeline's guards, throwing himself down near her, as if weary.

Now he was ready to take advantage of the slightest negligence on the part of her enemies. His greatest hope lay in the excitement which would attend the attack on the stockade. He knew that to those wild natures it would be a difficult thing to resist the temptation to abandon their post and join in the mad excitement

of carnage. Then if his opportunity came, he would overpower such of her guard as were left, hurry her to the horse he had provided for her, hamstringing those the speed of which he had reason to fear, and make a bee-line for the military post.

As yet, he feared to make himself known to her, lest in some exigency which might arise she should betray him by an appeal to him in supposed extremity. Unknown to her, he could use his own judgment.

Everything was finally in readiness for the attack; but the besiegers had to wait until fires they had kindled should burn out, so that they no longer illuminated the space about the stockade.

Senor Ramirez had exhausted his ingenuity in inventing engines of war which should make the storming of the stockade not only irresistible, but an event of peculiar horror in the lurid record of border warfare.

He had given directions that all of the bedding and cloth of every description found in the houses should be removed before they were set on fire, and all lard and grease of any kind. These materials he made into fire-balls—each having a stone in the center to give it weight—which he distributed among a score of stations fixed at intervals around the palisades. At each of these stations he constructed a catapult, or giant sling, by stripping two saplings standing close together, and tying to their tops ropes of equal length, the other ends of which were fastened to a board with a hole in the center, so that the whole looked very like an ordinary swing, save that the board was as high as a man could reach from the ground.

If, now, this board were pulled down and back at such an angle as it was desired to give the projectile, and the object to be thrown—a stone, fire-ball, or what not—were placed upon this board, the hole in which would keep it from sliding off, and, finally, the boards were released, then the trees, in springing back to place, would throw the missile into the air, with a force proportioned to their stiffness and the distance they were bent from the perpendicular. Any boy who has used a rubbersling tied to a forked stick will understand this contrivance.

A little practice will enable the operator of such a machine to throw missiles short distances with considerable accuracy of aim and range, and a score of such slings properly manned would give a small garrison ample work extinguishing the fire they threw in upon them.

In view of his revenge, Senor Ramirez had educated his gunners—if they can be so called—in advance.

But this was to be the last resort. He suspected that the money and valuables of small compass of the settlers were kept in the stockade, and he determined to take it by assault if possible, so that he might reap profit as well as satisfaction from the enterprise.

To this end he had prepared the battering-ram and scaling-ladders; and that they might be used without exposing his men to a withering fire, he was forced to wait for darkness.

During this interval Colorado Steve came and sat down beside Madeline, staring at her with a dull glow of admiration in his eyes,

Wild Zeph sat mute and unnoticed, watching them with the same suppressed ferocity that had characterized her ever since she had been bound.

Unable to endure longer the suspense of not knowing her captor's purpose with her, Madeline once more besought him to restore her to her friends.

"Waal, ma'am," he said, slowly, "I've been a-thinkin' o' this hyar thing over; an' it amounts to about the same thing any way ye kin look at it. Ye see, my motter has al'ays been: Whenever ye *git* a good thing, *keep* it! Waal, now, I've al'ays wanted a critter of about your p'int, as nigh as I kin make it out; an' now as I've got what fills the bill so well, o' course it'll stan' me in hand to hang on to it."

"But what do you mean?" cried Madeline, in dismay. "I am nothing to you!"

"M—m, waal, that jest depends," said Colorado Steve, deliberately. "Ye see, it's the senor's idee. He has a bankerin' arter that thar tow-head, ye onderstand, the which you shunted him off the track barnsome when he sot himself to honeyfuglin' of her. That thar's the senor's way, which the same it ain't mine, and don't ye furgit it! When I want a woman critter fur to come down, Mr. Crockett, I talks business to her; none o' yer cussin' an' sw'arin', nur cloutin' nur taking yer boot to her, ye onderstand, but only business. Now, says I to 'em, ye don't know what a clever fellow I be. The woman as ties to Colorado Steve don't have to dog her life out, like a squaw as is hitched to one of these hyar lazy Injun bucks. She's a lady, she is, what don't have to do nothin' at all from mornin' till night, but jest grow barnsomer an' barnsomer. She has all the caliker gownds she wants, an' jew'lry jest like they do in the States. Oh, thar ain't nothin' low-down about me, ye onderstand, when it comes to women critters!"

With a horrible sense of loathing Madeline realized that this rude fellow was paying court to her! He was going to have her whether or no; but he was willing to reconcile her to her lot.

"But this is infamous!" she cried, springing to her feet. "Do you think that I would submit to such an outrage? I despise you! I would rather kill myself than be the degraded slave of such a wretch as you!"

Colorado Steve looked at her with a broadening smile of admiration. He liked her best in these moments of tragic beauty.

"Waal!" he replied, "it don't make so much difference to me how ye *feel*, so long as ye keep yer claws out o' my wool. I reckon we'll git along about as most folks do. Thar's a good deal o' clapperclawin' in this hyar world; but I suppose it's fur to keep people from goin' to sleep. Thar's nothin' like music in the house fur to make the time pass!"

Shaken in every nerve, Madeline turned to fly from this cool monster; but the savages stood round her as stolid as dumb brutes. In an agony of despair she sunk down and covered her face with her hands.

Standing within ten feet of her, Old Buncomb's feelings were indescribable; but no outward sign of emotion distinguished him from the savages about him.

Senor Ramirez now made his appearance, to announce that the time had come for storming the stockade.

CHAPTER X.

STORMING THE STOCKADE.

IN the stockade every moment had been occupied making preparations for a desperate defense. But the time had passed in terrible suspense. It was near midnight; Old Buncomb and Little Tornado had been gone considerably over two hours, and not a sound had been heard from them since they had passed through the sally-port.

Scattered about the glen, which was now a fire-blackened desert, only heaps of dull red embers showed where the houses of the settlers had stood.

"Now be in readiness for a sudden attack," said the commandant, passing around the inclosure to see that every man was in his place and on the alert.

He had hardly regained his own place near the gate, when there was a rush, and the solid oaken barrier quivered under a shock like a thunderbolt.

"Fire!" cried the commandant, and a long line of flame appeared across the face of the palisade.

Then the scene that followed was indescribable. From the covert on every side rushed dark forms. Ladders were put against the wall, up each of which poured streams from the tossing sea of humanity below.

But up from behind the parapet rose other dark forms in furious opposition.

Firearms flashed their death signals. Dull, sodden blows were exchanged. Ladders were pushed away, to fall with their living freight backward.

Yells, curses, groans, resounded on every side; and with rhythmic regularity came the thunder-crash of the battering-ram.

Inside of the stockade the children were shut in the commandant's house, under the care of the more timid women. The bolder settlers' wives and daughters stood near their husbands and fathers, loading their rifles for them, and in some cases using them with good effect themselves. Others cared for the wounded and did such running back and forth as was needed.

It was an hour when even the boys became heroes.

But in spite of all, the savages gained a footing in one place, beating back the defenders, and swarming over the wall.

The commandant had made provision so that such a contingency might not strike panic into his ranks, and by drawing all to one point to repel the invaders, denude the rest of the wall, leaving it exposed to a second successful escalade. He had divided them into parties, each of which was evenly distributed about the palisade; each man knew the party to which he was assigned, and upon call they were to rally to any point required. When they had served the purpose for which they had thus been called together, they could be remanded to their places by a word of command.

He now cried:

"First rally! To the east wall! Rally! rally! First rally to the east wall!"

From every point men came rushing across the inclosure; but the proportionate dispersion was not changed, only weakened by one-fourth, while at the point where they massed the invaders found themselves charged with desperate energy.

But as the constant stream poured over the wall at their backs, they were reinforced as fast as they were beaten down, until the commandant cried once more:

"Second rally!"

Then a second detachment came to the support of the first, leaving the wall in general with half its original defenders. These were desperately pressed in many places, but they fought on as men will fight who know that defeat means death to themselves and life worse than death to their loved ones.

"Charge them! Down with the red devils!" shouted the commandant.

And clubbing his rifle—for he could not wait for reloading—he fell upon his foes like a madman.

His men followed his example; and presently those they had left to struggle on without knowing what was happening at their backs had their fainting hopes revived by hearing rousing Yankee cheers. They knew that that meant victory; and they responded lustily and threw new energy into their own efforts.

The entrance over the wall which they had made cost the savages dear. Their dead and wounded lay in great heaps at this point within the palisade, over which the victors climbed as they regained the wall and hurled back the ladders which had so nearly proved fatal to them.

The assault was a failure. The gate stood firm, and the escalade was beaten back at every point. The Apache chief called his forces off in sullen rage.

"Well, we have tried the white man's way," he said, "and my people are food for coyotes."

He addressed Colorado Steve, speaking in his own tongue; but he glowered at Senor Ramirez, whom he considered the cause of this fiasco.

Colorado Steve took the matter quite coolly, though his Spanish partner turned a sickly yellow with fear when Steve translated to him.

"What does he say?" he had asked, judging from the savage's manner that it was nothing particularly complimentary to him.

And Colorado Steve had answered:

"He says that you are an infernal fool for insistin' on doin' a thing the hardest way, an' tharby makin' crow-bait out o' his braves. If you hadn't been sich a hog, you wouldn't 'a' tried it—you know that."

This was a very liberal translation, it must be confessed; but perhaps it was not far from the spirit of the Apache's words.

"Well," said Senor Ramirez angrily, "if you're going to burn them out you might as well begin at once."

"Now ye're shoutin'!" was Colorado Steve's well-satisfied response, as he gave the signal for the second attempt.

During the conflict just described, Old Buncomb's breast was a battle-ground of conflicting

emotions which ebbed and flowed with the changing vicissitudes of the struggle of which he was an inactive witness. He longed to be putting in his blow, foremost among his friends so hard beset. A single arm might turn the fortunes of war. Again and again he reproached himself for his abandonment of them. But then he saw the bowed figure before him.

Madeline sat with her face buried in her lap, her eyes and ears stopped to shut out the horrible sights and sounds that assailed her shrinking senses. She shuddered and moaned and prayed. And Old Buncomb waited for a favorable opportunity to catch her up in his arms, and rush off to the horses with her.

It did not come. Her savage guards, though greatly excited, stood fast by their post.

And now a beautiful blue star shot up into the air at an angle of forty-five degrees, described a graceful curve, and fell into the stockade. It was followed by another and another, and then by a flight of them from every direction. The spectacular effect was very like a bombardment with Roman candles.

But within the palisade they had reason to know that it was not such harmless amusement. It was as if it rained fire from Heaven. Everywhere the fire-balls alighted, burning furiously, and oozing pine resin which blazed up as it ran.

There was a spring of living water within the stockade, and an ample supply of fire-buckets; but the men, and even the women, were kept so busy putting out the fire which ever blazed in a fresh spot, that they could have spared few to defend the wall against such an assault as that which they had just defeated.

But this was not now the purpose of the savages. They were burning for revenge from the severe punishment they had received. Nothing but a fire would satisfy them. They would not abate one pang of their distracted enemies.

Old Buncomb could not look upon this unmoved. He saw the houses within the palisade blaze up again and again. He saw the men who sought to beat out the flames and drench them with water, throw up their hands and fall backward, as their bodies were pierced by the bullets of some Indian sharpshooters perched in a tree. He saw Indians rush forward and pile brush against the windward side of the palisade, preparatory to setting fire to it, and sweeping the whole in one red conflagration. He saw others waiting, rifle in hand, to receive the settlers, when the moment came for them to make that mad dash for the sheltering trees and darkness, after their defenses became no longer tenable. He saw all this, and he idle!

He rose and paced restlessly back and forth. He might have joined the besieging party, and under cover of the excitement, slain both of the white renegades; but what was their death compared with the possible loss of a chance to secure Madeline's escape? Furthermore, the stockade was doomed, so that their death would not arrest its downfall.

In that prison-house of fire all was the wildest confusion. Despair was fast making its own the men who fought on in one slender hope.

"Remember," cried the commandant, who was rushing about in all parts of the inclosure, en-

couraging and directing, "if Little Tornado had been captured, we should have had some sign of it. If he has made his way to the post, he may be here at any moment with help. We must not yield until the walls fairly crumble about our heads."

But at this moment the brush piled against the palisade sent up tongues of flame which the rising wind beat down upon the roofs of the houses within. Then the fire fiends took full possession. It was useless longer to contend with them. The acrid smoke, the stifling heat, the crackle and roar of the conflagration, and beyond and above all the yells of the savage foe, struck terror to every heart.

The women and children, driven out of the shelter that had thus far kept their manifestations of terror from their defenders, now clung screaming about their male relatives, driving them frantic with a sense of their utter inability to cope with the situation.

Then the men who had thus far subordinated their individual wills to that of their appointed leader, rebelled.

"Must we stay here to be roasted alive?" they cried passionately. "What death can the red devils inflict worse than what we must endure here?"

A shriek of terror went up from a group of women and children, and they scattered frantically in every direction. A fire-ball had fallen among them; one was struck, and her clothes were instantly in a blaze. In an agony of fear and pain she rushed about so wildly that she was caught with difficulty and the fire finally extinguished, but not until she had been severely burned. The shrieks and moans of this poor creature added to the demoralization of the little garrison.

"Let us go out!" they cried. "A few may escape, though the rest perish. We all have the same chance to be the lucky one. We can gain nothing by staying here."

Then, seeing that he could hold them no longer, the commandant yielded.

"Men!" he cried, "remember that our only hope lies in discipline. If we preserve order, we may save something; if we break into confusion, we shall lose everything. Our women and children must be protected to the last extremity. By forming two lines, with them in the middle, a few of us may manage to cut our way through to the open plains. You all know where the horses are tethered to the eastward of the hills. Make your way thither, mount, and then try to reach the post to the northward."

The timid Ruth had now come out in a new character. She was the most self-possessed of the women who were not hardy enough to take active part in the defense.

"My darling," said her father, tenderly, "I must lead my men, but I cannot let you away from my side. We go out first. You will be between me and Jonas Dawson. Whatever happens, keep close to us, so that we can protect you to the best of our ability."

"Do not fear for me, dear father," she replied, tremulously, yet with heroic fortitude. "Let me kiss you before we go out. It may be for the last time."

He put his arm about her, and stroked her yellow hair. He was thinking of her mother just then—the wife of his young manhood, who lay within sound of the peaceful village church-bells, in far New England.

"Are you all ready?" he asked, when the line was formed and waiting.

"Ready!" came the response.

"Then open the sally-port. And may God shelter us with his hand!"

The sally-port was thrown open. The commandant and Jonas Dawson were the first out, closely followed by Ruth. Urged to expedition by the flames, others poured forth.

Then there was a burst of blood-curdling yells, and a terrific combat.

How it happened Ruth never clearly knew. The Indians fairly swarmed about them. She saw her father knocked senseless; then she was grasped by the wrist and hurried toward the gulch down which they had arranged to go.

At first her only consciousness was that she was not in the hands of a savage; but a tongue of flame leaping up showed her the not less distasteful person of Senor Ramirez.

The Indians were rushing thither from every quarter. The fall of their leader and the numbers of their foes daunted the settlers; and dragging the commandant with them, they hurried back into the stockade.

It was a move of unreasoning fear—the retreat from immediate death to a more terrible one than even the tomahawk and scalping-knife of the savages. They stood amid the whirling smoke and flames of their crumbling defenses, and no one could say what was to be done next.

And yet this was the salvation of many of their lives. Five minutes in a hand-to-hand struggle with their enemies would have seen them annihilated. They had not waited five minutes in that despair which made strong men sit down and bow their heads into their hands and weep, when a wild shout swept the glen, causing all to leap to their feet with a thrill of delirious hope, veined with agonizing doubt.

Could it be help from the post at last?

"Hush! hush!" cried Jonas Dawson, the blacksmith and wheelwright, who, after deeds of valor that would have shamed the heroes of ancient fable, had at last succumbed to what seemed an inevitable fate; and he extended his hands over the people to quiet their wailings of despair.

Then women stilled their children, and pushed back their tear-dampened hair to listen with bated breath.

"Yes! yes! it was come at last! Far above the roar of the conflagration rose the rattle of firearms and the yells of combatants in fierce encounter. It could be none other than the soldiers whom Little Tornado had brought after a ride without parallel.

"Out of this raging hell!" cried the blacksmith, dashing open the sally-port. "We may yet be in time to git a crack at them imps o' Satan! No quarter to the red devils; but take them black-hearted varlets o' renegades alive, if possible. Nothin' short o' hangin' will do fur them!"

Once more they streamed through the sally-

port; but this time there was no one to receive them. The Indians were in full retreat, hotly pressed by the soldiery.

Under the lead of Jonas Dawson, the settlers ran at the top of their speed to the horses tethered on the plains, that they might join in the chase. They were late, but they were terrible in their implacable rage. Many kept on, slaying all that they overtook, long after the soldiers drew off from the chase. They were exacting revenge for their desolated fields.

But disappointment awaited them in one respect. They saw nothing of the renegades nor of their captives.

Of course Little Tornado knew nothing as yet of the calamity that had befallen his sweetheart; but as soon as he had satisfied himself that Madeline was not among the flying savages, he abandoned the pursuit, turning back to ascertain whether Old Buncomb had effected her rescue.

Dashing up to the group of women and children who, just beyond the range of heat, were sadly watching the structure which, having sheltered them so well, was now a crumbling ruin, he leaped to the ground, crying:

"Where is Madeline?"

But before they could answer him, the fact that another was not the first to receive him struck a chill to his heart, and he added:

"Ruth! Where is Ruth?"

When he knew the worst—and it was told him by his mother, who clung about him mingling her thanksgivings to God for his merciful sparing of her brave boy with her distress over the uncertainty which yet hung about the fate of her daughter—he staggered under the blow.

"Gone! gone!" he cried, "and I alone to follow them! Not a word—not a sign from Old Buncomb!"

Then, heart-sick, he put his weeping mother away; and directing the women to gather torches, he set out in search of a fresh horse, and to get some of the soldiers to return and enter upon a systematic search for the trail of the abductors.

It was really a hopeless task to be undertaken before the morning light; but he could not endure to remain in idleness, knowing that every moment was bearing his loved ones further and further away.

CHAPTER XI

WILD ZEPH'S PROPOSAL.

SEÑOR RAMIREZ was triumphant. Fortune had played into his hands better than he could have asked.

"Now, my pretty one!" he cried, thrusting his face close into that of terrified little Ruth, and grinning with ferocious exultation, as he dragged her along, "now we will see who is master! You would have me—me! Señor Ramirez!"—and he swelled like a turkey-cock with importance—"ducked in a horse-trough, would you? Well, you shall give me a kiss for every drop of water in that bath, my dear!"

And again he grinned in her face, that grimace of the round eyes and glittering teeth, so that she thought that he was about to put his threat into instant execution.

"Never, you wretch!" she exclaimed, avert-

ing her own face and striking him with her open palm.

Ramirez laughed like a jackal.

"*Caramba!* not now!" he cried. "This no time or place for love-making—more's the pity! for I am impatient to begin, I promise you! But before morning we shall be in a cozy retreat, with the birds caroling our hymeneal hymn."

Shuddering at his fiendish humor, poor Ruth was hurried through groups of savages, who leered at her with covetous greed. Everything she saw caused a chill of horror to thrill through her, until she was dragged into the group where Madeline was held a prisoner.

At sight of her friend's suffering, every generous impulse in Madeline's bosom was stirred.

She leaped to her feet with eyes that blazed while they were suffused with tears at the thought that this sensitive nature was to be exposed to the ordeal that had nearly broken her prouder spirit.

"You infamous villain!" she cried, snatching her friend from Ramirez.

But then grief overcame her, as Ruth sunk sobbing upon her breast; and she murmured, brokenly:

"Oh, you poor dear! To think that *you* might not be kept out of that monster's clutches!"

But the generous heart of the commandant's pretty child would not be confined to her own misery.

"O, Maddie! Maddie!" she sobbed, clinging to her friend. "I am so delighted to have you in my arms once more! We all imagined everything terrible as having happened to you! And here you are, alive and well, at least! How can I be sufficiently thankful? Even for myself, I am not nearly so frightened as I was. "But"—and she lowered her voice to a whisper, with her lips close to her friend's ear—"haven't you seen Mr. Bunker?"

"Mr. Bunker?" whispered Madeline in return, starting and beginning to tremble in every nerve. "No! no! Where is he?"

"He left the stockade hours ago—just after dark, and Sidney with him."

"Mr. Bunker and Sidney left the stockade? But how, and for what?"

"Sidney went for help to the post; but Mr. Bunker came out to save you. Oh, Maddie, you darling! he loves you!—you will never know how much! He nearly went crazy when he found that you had not reached the stockade."

"Hush! hush!" cried Madeline, putting her hand over her friend's mouth, and even trying to thrust her out of her arms.

Every vestige of blood had fled her cheeks and lips. Her eyes flashed; she panted and trembled and seemed to shrink as if afraid.

Ramirez had gone in quest of Colorado Steve. Now that he had the one thing for which he had invested the glen, aside from his natural lust for revenge, he was anxious to put her in a place of security.

Not fearing that the savages would understand her, Ruth had allowed her voice to swell into a murmur as she told of Old Buncomb's love.

And that fortunate gentleman stood so near

that he caught enough to understand the cause of Miss Fortescue's emotion!

Ruth clung to her and persisted:

"Oh, you must let me tell you! He was so frantic that he came near sacrificing himself and all the rest of us. But he was grand—you should have seen and heard him!—when he seized your mother's wrist and cried:—'I will fetch your daughter back to you!' Then he threw open the gate and rushed out into the very teeth of the Indians! And, oh, Maddiel but for Sidney, he would have been captured and no doubt tortured by that villainous Colorado Steve. Sidney saved him and all of us!"

By this time Madeline was hugging and kissing her friend with sobs of delight that for the time banished all sense of her present situation.

And Old Buncomb was—"taking it all in!"

Meanwhile Senor Ramirez had found his partner.

"Look you, Senor Estevan!" he said. "We have the beautiful senoritas. Is it not so?"

"Waal, I sw'ar!" cried the literal Steve. "Do you have to ask me; when you have jess seen 'em with your own eyes?"

"Good!" replied Ramirez. "You saw me capture the commandant's sunny-haired daughter?"

"The towhead? Yaas!" assented the uncompromising admirer of black-eyed "Wenuses."

"Did you notice anything strange at that encounter?"

"Come! come! I ain't a-guessin' o' conundrums so much as I used to was! What in Cain air ye tryin' to git through ye, anyhow?"

"Did not ye notice that neither this Senor Bunkero nor the rattle-head of a boy was among those who came through the sally-port?"

"Waal, I suppose they was inside, along of a lot more. There didn't hut a handful git out. But what o' that?"

"Abl but would not they have been of that handful, if they had been in there to come out?"

Colorado Steve uttered an oath, as he always did when his more subtle partner arrested his attention by reasoning out something which had escaped his slower brain.

"Moreover," pursued Ramirez, "the boy is in love with the commandant's daughter. Curse him! I will yet drink his heart's blood!"

"Stow your Greaser nonsense!" cried Steve, impatiently, "and give us what you-make of all o' this!"

"Well, if the boy had been in the stockade when the fair Ruth was dragged away, he would not have been content to remain shut up in that burning trap without making an attempt to rescue her. Therefore he was not within."

"But whar in thunder was he then?"

"Suppose he and the Senor Bunkero came out through the sally-port while yet it was dark, and rode to the post to the northward?"

Once more Colorado Steve swore.

"Look you!" said his partner. "The stockade will not hold a living man more than ten or fifteen minutes longer. They will be forced to make another sortie. But the Indians are here to receive them, and not a man will escape. Why, then, should we wait? The soldiers may be here at any moment, and then it will be too

late for us to hope to get the ladies away. One scream will betray us."

"Curse 'em! we kin slit their gullets ef they go to squeakin'!"

"True. But if you like yours so, you will pardon me if I prefer mine with the blood in her veins!"

"Waal, I suppose it won't do no harm to be ready to git, if we're druv to it."

And Colorado Steve, who was ready enough of action when he had determined upon it, dashed off in the direction of the prisoners.

It was lucky for him that he did so without further delay; for he had scarcely reached them when he heard the thud of the soldiers' horses' hoofs.

Then came their fierce yells as they charged the savages.

"Hyar! Fetch them hosses! Lively!--lively!" cried Colorado Steve.

And for a moment all was wild confusion and hurry.

Now was the time to try Old Buncomb's nerve! Here was help just at hand. If he lost this opportunity, when would another present itself?

A man of less thorough self-command might have cried out to the girls to run, and then have drawn his revolvers and fought the Outcasts and their savage allies single-handed, to cover their retreat.

But what would have been the probable result?

They were women untrained to meet a sudden emergency with that iron presence of mind which nothing can distract. They were unwarned of his presence. During their captivity neither had given a thought to planning to escape or seizing upon any opportunity which might offer. The most important point—that Old Buncomb was disguised as an Indian—Ruth had forgotten to mention, in her interest in the romantic side of the affair; so Madeline, who was most self-possessed, would not be prepared to have one bearing the semblance of a savage speak to her of escape. Even when they comprehended, to have the hope of liberation thrust upon them so abruptly would throw them into confusion; and they would be as apt to run in the wrong direction as in the right. Their natural instinct would be to keep together; and in the effort at mutual protection invaluable time would be lost.

Then there was another and more terrible consideration. Seeing them likely to escape, the savages might stop their flight with a whizzing tomahawk or a keen-pointed knife.

No; he could not take this fearful risk. He must wait. When they were mounted and in rapid motion on the open plain and in the darkness, then they would be more evenly matched against their captors, if an opportunity offered to fly. Then the fleet powers of the animal which his foresight had secured for Madeline would tell. It was natural that his first thought should be for Madeline; but he had the generosity to manage so that Ruth was mounted on the horse that he had selected for himself.

All the chances of the situation flashed through his mind like lightning; and he was the most prompt and the most active of those who second-

ed Colorado Steve's efforts. So much so, indeed, that Steve noticed him, and speaking in Apache, said:

"You act as if you had some snap to you. Ride close behind me with this spit-fire,"—indicating Wild Zeph—"and if she tries to come any of her fancy dodges, put your knife into her!"

"Good!" grunted Old Buncomb in true Indian fashion.

And lifting the half-breed in his arms, he put her on the horse assigned to her. In order that she might retain her seat, it was necessary to unbind her hands. While he was busy with her, she bent quickly so as to bring her lips close to his ear, and electrified him by whispering:

"I know you! I recognized your voice. You see I have not betrayed you. Why? I want my revenge, and you can help me to it, while serving yourself. Give me a knife—you have two of them. I will help you to escape with the woman you have come to save. Why, when I hate one of them so? Because I hunger and thirst for my revenge more than I long to see her suffer! Give me a knife, I say!"

Old Buncomb was astonished by her keenness of observation. It was true that he had two knives—his own and the one he had taken from the savages to whom he owed his disguise.

"Wait!" he said. "If you are really faithful to me, I will know when your opportunity comes."

She seemed content with that, perhaps because she felt confidence in his judgment.

Then they rode out through the hills to the open plain, to the westward, while the soldiers were chasing the savages through the blackened glen toward the southern pass, into which Little Tornado had dashed to warn them of the peril that followed at his heels.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HALF-BREED'S REVENGE.

SEÑOR RAMIREZ rode in advance, on Ruth's right; Colorado Steve rode next, but on the left hand of his lady.

So much was accidental. But Old Buncomb took his position deliberately, determined by the position of those in advance. He placed himself on Wild Zeph's right.

This brought him on the same side with Señor Ramirez, with Madeline between them; while Wild Zeph was directly behind Colorado Steve.

The Indians, now increased in number to a dozen or fifteen by those whom Steve had brought with him, surrounded them like a body-guard.

In this order they dashed out upon the plain, the position of the six remaining relatively the same, though the savages shifted somewhat. Now they were a little further forward, now a little further back.

Old Buncomb waited for a time when no one of them should be behind him, so that his act would be detected. Then he thrust a knife into Wild Zeph's hand.

The half-breed clutched it with the avidity of a drowning wretch fastening his death-grip on a rope. Then she spurred her horse forward

with its point; and the next instant buried in to the hilt in Colorado Steve's back!

"Die, you accursed traitor!" she shrieked, so as to draw all eyes upon her, and leave not a doubt as to what had been done and who had done it.

Her aim had been deadly. She had planted the weapon just below the shoulder-blade, to the left of the spine. Its point must have reached Colorado Steve's evil heart.

He threw up his hands, and fell backward between his horse and that ridden by Madeline.

But while his fast-glazing eyes were upon her, Wild Zeph spat in his face, so fierce was her bitter resentment of the insults he had heaped upon her by courting her rival in her presence. Then, while he was falling away from her, she struck it with her open palm.

But she was not yet done, and it was lucky that Old Buncomb had not trusted fully to her good faith. He had his eye upon her, on the lookout for some act of treachery. It was not in Indian nature to forego her resentment toward Madeline.

What he feared—what he had to take the risk of for the sake of an advantage which he hoped to gain by her assault upon Steve—followed instantly upon her successful disposal of the first object of her hatred.

Unable to reach Madeline across Colorado Steve's horse, Old Buncomb saw the mad creature throw back her hand preparatory to hurling her knife at Madeline, with the deadly accuracy which makes the bowie in skillful hands as fatal a weapon at a few paces' distance as in close combat.

But he was ready for her; and as loth as he was to wound her, a woman, Madeline's preservation demanded that he shoot at her hand, even while he spurred his horse forward between Madeline and Colorado Steve, riding directly over the latter as he fell.

The bullet sped straight to its mark, piercing the back of her hand. As the knife fell from her grasp behind her, she uttered a scream of savage hate and pain. If she could have got at Old Buncomb, she would have torn him with her nails.

But self-preservation is not the last thing that even a jealous Indian beauty thinks of; and, accepting the defeat of that part of her revenge, she reined her horse to the left and plunged into the darkness.

"After her, after her!" cried Old Buncomb, in the Apache tongue. "The Jezebel has slain our white chief. Take her alive for torture!"

It was not wanton cruelty that prompted this suggestion; but if she was shot, there would be nothing to take the savages away from the spot, while what he needed, in order to make sure of his escape with the girls, was the excitement of a chase, when there would be no one to observe him too closely.

Señor Ramirez unwittingly aided his plan; for enraged at the thought of losing the partner who was so useful to him—and all for the whim of a woman—he, too, urged the savages on.

Forgetful of their prisoners, or thinking that Señor Ramirez could manage them alone, they dashed after Wild Zeph in a body,

The next instant Senor Ramirez was astonished to find himself seized by the throat and dragged over the withers of Old Buncomb's horse, while that supposed Indian still called after the pursuers in their own tongue, urging them not to let the fugitive escape if they had to chase her into the Gulf of Mexico.

Ramirez would have cried out for help, but he found himself in the grip of a giant in strength. In spite of his wildest struggles to at least slip off the horse's back, he was held fast; while the grip on his throat seemed to grow tighter and tighter, until his eyes protruded from their sockets, the veins in his face swelled almost to bursting, his ears rung and his brain reeled. Still that remorseless grip did not relax, until he hung limp and insensible across the lap of his captor.

Meanwhile Old Buncomb had not held his own tongue, because he found it advantageous to hold Senor Ramirez's throat.

"Madeline!—Ruth!—it is I! Do you recognize me?—Old Buncomb! About face for the glen; and don't spare horse-flesh!"

A sharp cry, almost instantly suppressed, escaped Ruth; but Madeline, though she was thrilled to her heart's center, only said, in a low tone:

"Oh, Mr. Bunker!"

The next instant she had wheeled into line with him, and had reached out and put her hand on his arm, while she leaned forward so as to bring her face near enough to see him in the darkness.

Ruth was on the other side, with her face turned toward the savages.

Old Buncomb leaned toward Madeline, so as to meet her half-way, which brought their faces within a foot of each other.

"Ruth has told you," he said, with a fine vibration in his voice. "Is it all right?"

"Yes!" she answered, her own voice thrilling with a passion at that moment intensified by gratitude and the flood of emotion that came with the new sense of freedom and the knowledge that she owed it to him from whom it was a delight to take life and love and all! "Oh, Hugh!"

He laughed a low, happy laugh; and then asked:

"May I?"

The longing of her own heart told her what he meant; and she answered:

"If you can!"

"Can!" he cried, with a great swelling of the heart. "I can do anything that leads me to you, my darling! my love! my joy!"

And watching for a time when their horses were in step, he cried:

"Hold still—now!"

And their lips met in a kiss as sweet as it was short.

"Well, I declare!" cried Ruth, looking round in time to catch them at this pretty folly. "If that isn't what I call love-making under difficulties."

"Don't be envious, Ruth," laughed Old Buncomb. "Who has been setting us the example all summer, I'd like to know?"

"Not I—if that's what you mean to insinuate."

"Oh, oh!" cried Old Buncomb, in a tone which implied that that was a "whopper."

Then he laughed again, notwithstanding the fact that at this moment the savages discovered that the prisoners were making for the glen at top speed.

In the darkness they could not make out whether they were accompanied by Senor Ramirez or not, and thinking that perhaps one of the girls had succeeded as well with him as Wild Zeph had with his partner, and having a wholesome fear of the soldiers, they desisted from their pursuit of Wild Zeph, thereby allowing her to escape, and turned toward the mountains to seek safety for themselves.

When Old Buncomb neared the glen he told the girls to ride ahead, and to say nothing about his prisoner. Not knowing what this signified, they obeyed him implicitly.

They found the commandant recovered from the stunning blow he had received on the head, and bemoaning the loss of his daughter, while Little Tornado was just completing the preparations for going in search of their trail. The soldiers had returned from the running fight, and the settlers were dropping in one by one.

In spite of the general loss of life as well as property, the happy reunion of the families with which we have been most nearly interested was shared by all; for Ruth and Madeline were the pride of the glen. And when it was found that the chaplain of the post had accompanied the Boys in Blue; and Old Buncomb, having removed the stains from his face, and proving to be a very comely man of not more than thirty, urged the need of Madeline and her mother to all the assistance they could get to re-establish their fallen fortunes—then no one denied the propriety of a quiet wedding, with Ruth and Little Tornado for bridemaid and best man.

Little Tornado looked very rueful and Ruth very shame-faced, when it was suggested that they would have to wait until they were old enough to grace a happier occasion.

The soldiers took their departure, promising to bring assistance to the destitute settlers in the morning.

Then Old Buncomb quietly drew the male portion of the settlers aside; and among the hills they went through a very different ceremony, in which Senor Ramirez was the central figure.

As the captain of the post knew nothing about this officially, he had carefully complied with the mysterious request not to ask questions!—he was not responsible, if the most regular forms of law were disregarded.

But there—as here—was an end to the Outcasts of the Glen!

THE END.

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